



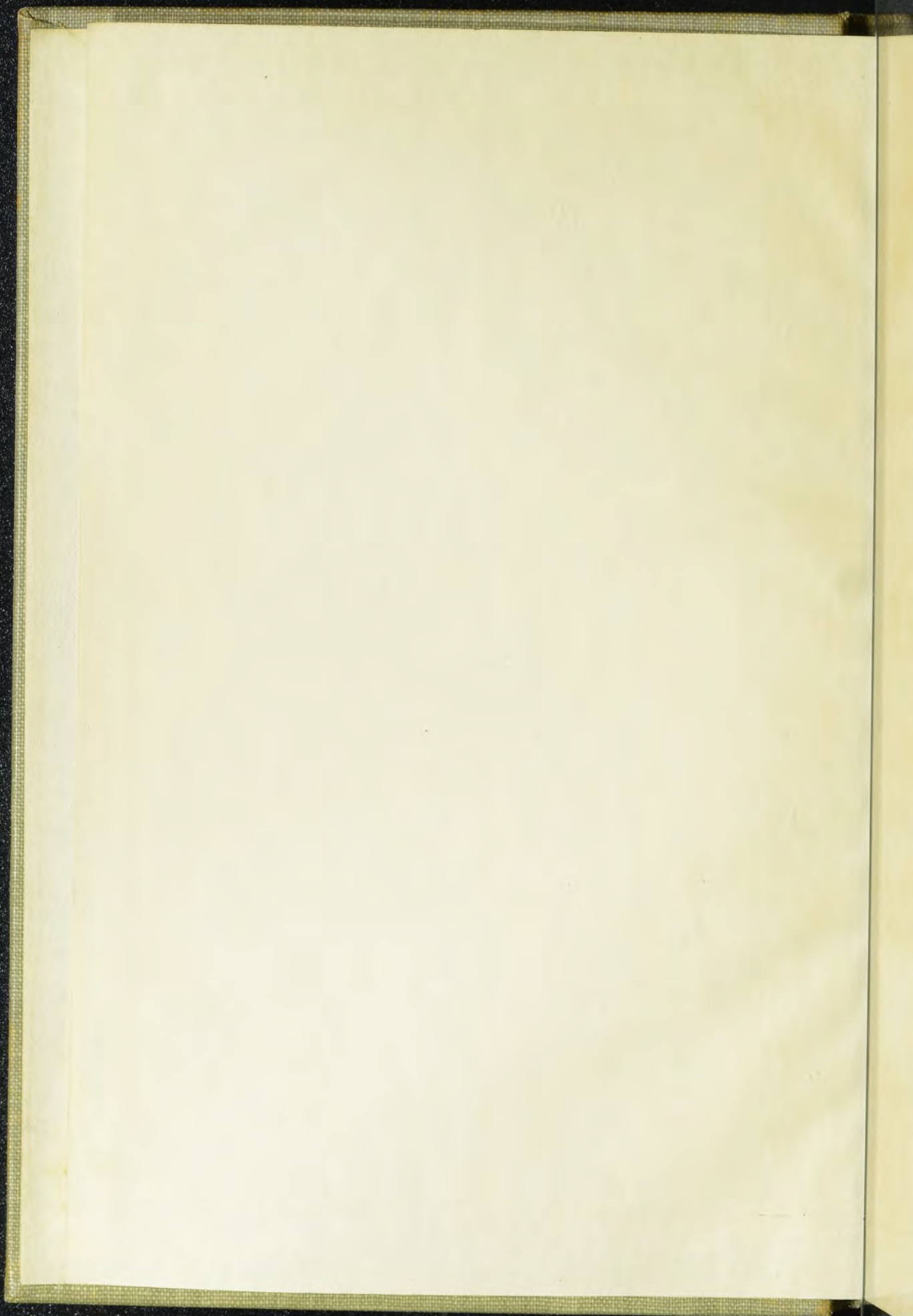
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THE FAIRY MAN

*WORKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

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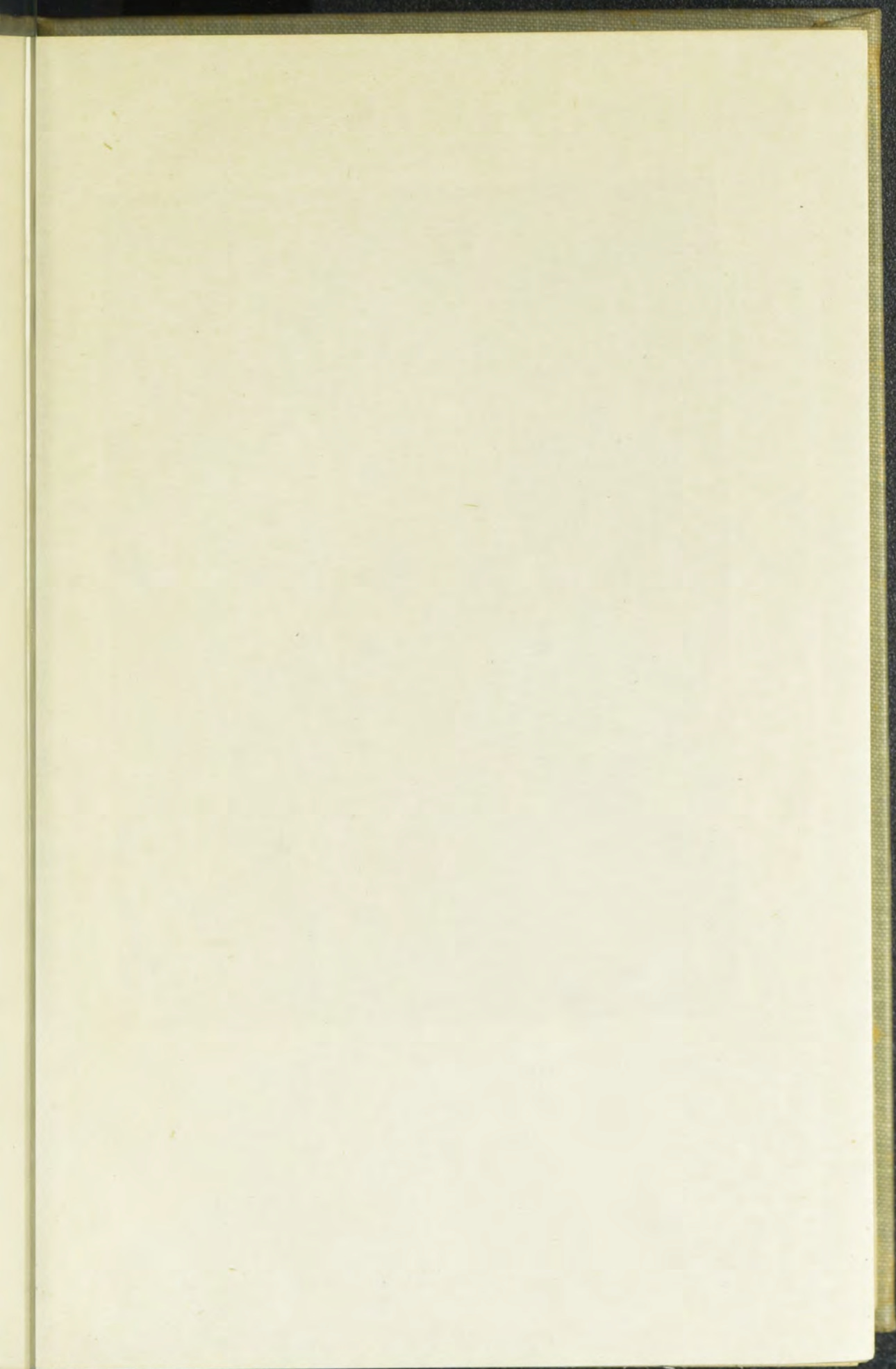
ECHOES FROM THE FLEET

THE SECRET OF CONSOLATION

THE LORD HIGH ADMIRAL

THE MASTER-BEGGARS OF  
BELGIUM

HISTORY OF THE BLACK WATCH  
(WITH F. W. WALKER)





"THE DOOR OPENED SILENTLY AND A HEAD APPEARED."

[p. 14



*The*  
*FAIRY MAN*



*By*  
*L. Cope Cornford*

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TO  
THE CHILDREN  
OF YESTERDAY

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## BOOK I

### I

#### TROUBLE IN THE FAMILY

TOWARDS six o'clock on a winter's afternoon, not so very long ago, a boy marched into the schoolroom, dropped his cap upon a chair, hove a parcel of battered school books into a corner, and flung himself into the worn leather arm-chair beside the dusty fire. It was very quiet in the shadowy room, buried in a by-street of Maida Vale. A lamp depending from the centre of the ceiling illumined the red-and-blue checked table-cloth, stained here and there with ink, and in the shadow beyond were the brown bookcase, filled with a disorderly array

of books ; the long, low uncurtained window, with its broad seat and its dingy red cushions ; and, hanging on the wall opposite to the window, a large picture crowded with figures, among which knights in armour were dimly discernible.

Presently the boy in the arm-chair sighed deeply, gathered himself together, and, reaching forward, rang the bell. After a considerable pause the stout, middle-aged figure of a woman, breathing audibly, appeared in the doorway, her expression indefinitely suggesting reproach.

“ Was it you rang, Master George ? Well I never. I thought it was your Aunt. And me trapesing all up them stairs for nothing.”

George, affecting to be startled from a profound abstraction, rose wearily to his feet and leaned against the mantel.

“ Hullo, Cookie, is that you ? I say, I’m awfully sorry. I am really. I rang for Isabel. She is a belle, isn’t she, Cook, dear ? I suppose she’s gone out with her young man—left you to do all the work, as usual.”

“ How you do go on, Master George. It’s Isabel’s evening out, you know that, and little enough for the poor girl, I say, once a fortnight, and all she has to do. I expect she’s gone to see about another place. But don’t you tell your Aunt I told you, Master George.”

“ I won’t if you’re good,” said George. “ But I say, she isn’t going to leave, is she ? ”

“ Same as I am, my dear,” returned Cook, with the failure of an attempt to be jaunty.



"O, look here, Cookie, this won't do at all. Leave before Christmas? No Christmas dinner?" George remonstrated.

"Goodness above," said Cook, tremulously, "knows I don't want to do it, Master George. We wouldn't leave the Master—no slave-driving about *him*, I always say—but I shall be driven to it, I know I shall. What with your Aunt, and the new governess coming, and all——"

"That's right," interposed George, bitterly. "Leave a sinking ship. Desert us in our hour of need. Nothing to eat on Christmas Day. No matter."

The kindly woman turned her head away. "What did you please to want when you rang, Master George?" she asked with dignity.

"I should have thought you could have guessed," returned George. "Tea, for instance. First day of the holidays—no tea ready. I believe I was fainting from hunger when you came in and roused me from the stupor of exhaustion. Jam, sardines, crumpets, cake to finish up with. And buttered toast. Please. Thank you so much, Cookie. Quick, as you love us, though you *are* going to leave us!"

"Your Aunt give orders, Master George, as you was to wait for your teas, you and Miss Marjorie, till the Master come home, it being holidays, so as to make less work, she says. I says to her, 'Never mind about the work, ma'am, I says, young gentlemen, they must be fed, and young ladies too, at their age, which '—go along, now, Master George, do.'"

George, with his arm about the matron's waist, was attempting to waltz with her.

"Get us something in the kitchen, Cook, dear."

"How can I if you won't let me go. Well, just this once—mind, I don't promise nothing. Your Aunt, she's locked the store-cupboard."

"What a house!" said George. "But think what it would be without you. Just think over that, Cookie."

"Let go," said the lady; "here's your Aunt a-coming." And she fled.

But there entered a girl, a year or two older than her brother, clad in hat and jacket and carrying a satchel.

"Hullo, Marjorie," George greeted her. "Thought it was the old 'un."

"George," said Marjorie, "what do you think? We're to do lessons every day in the holidays!"

"Rot!" said George, angrily. "How do you know?"

"Aunt Eliza told me so, just now. She said our reports were so bad that we've got to make up for lost time. Isn't it appalling?"

"Murderous," said George, briefly. "But who's going to make us work, does Aunt Eliza suppose? Has she thought of that, for instance?"

"The new governess. Our new, blue governess," replied Marjorie, wearily sinking into the arm-chair.

"How do you know she's blue?"

"I see her blue in my mind," said Marjorie. "A horrid, electric blue. With spectacles."

"I could find it in my heart, as they say in books,

to be almost sorry for her," said George, grimly, after a short pause.

"I'm not," returned Marjorie. "But that won't do either. We can't rag her."

"Not?" said George, surprised. "Why not? O, I see—because she's a woman—a defenceless woman, and so on. Is that it?"

"Don't be so silly, George. You know what I mean. It's because of Daddy."

"I don't see that the Governor need come into it at all," retorted George rather sulkily.

"Poor soul, he's so worried," said Marjorie. "You know how worried he is, already."

"You mean when he says he can't see his way clear? It's only habit," said George, coolly.

"He's worried about money, or something, at the office," pursued the girl. "He is, really. And he keeps on saying he would have been all right if he had been made to work when he was young. That's why he tries to be strict with us."

"I like to see the Governor trying to be strict," said George, with a grin. "He can't keep it up. He simply leaves it all to Aunt Eliza. That's why she's here. I know. Don't tell *me*. And now, as if Aunt Eliza wasn't enough, we're to have a governess."

"It can't be helped," said Marjorie. "It's your fault. If you hadn't teased Aunt Eliza, and asked her questions she couldn't answer, we shouldn't have had the new governess."

"That's right, say it's me," grumbled George. "I ask you, who *could* stand Aunt Eliza? I don't

believe the Governor could. He's away at the office all day, and he doesn't know. He won't like it when he finds the servants are going, all because of Aunt Eliza.

"They're not, are they? How awful. Nothing to eat at Christmas."

"Just what I said," remarked George.

"You won't have to do the cooking. I shall, just because I'm a girl. Why should a girl always be supposed to cook, and not a boy? Fancy having to cook all the holidays, and make the beds, and wash up! O, it's a shame."

"Fancy having to eat what you've cooked," said George, kindly.

Marjorie sprang to her feet.

"George, this is a crisis in our lives. The servants going, the new governess coming, Daddy in trouble—why does everything happen at once? George, we must do something."

"Just what I said," returned her brother. "I said, 'Get rid of the new governess for a start,' and you wouldn't have it. Now let's have your scheme."

"If only," cried the girl, "if only there was a way of escape!"

"Run away, you mean? That's no use—not the slightest. That's what kids do in story-books."

"I didn't mean that at all," said Marjorie. "I meant a way of escape from all these horrid things. A sort of transformation scene. I can't explain, but I know what I mean."

George eyed her gloomily.

"What's the good of talking? It's hopeless," he said.

"We're exactly in that state," went on Marjorie, "when people in fairy stories are saved by magic."

"Very true and very interesting," retorted George, with elaborate sarcasm. "What a clever girl you are. I didn't know you believed in magic."

"I never said I believed in magic. I said, if we did, we could find a way of escape."

"Believing in a thing doesn't make it true," said George.

"How could I believe in a thing which wasn't true?" asked Marjorie, with the air of one who states the indisputable.

"O, don't argue," said George. "I know what you've been doing—reading fairy stories again, after you've gone to bed."

"Well, you do it too."

"Purely for amusement. I don't allow my head to be turned," retorted George, loftily.

"Daddy says you can't help having your head turned," said Marjorie. "He says he would have been ever so much better off now if he hadn't read all sorts of things when he was a boy instead of working. That's why he made Aunt Eliza forbid us to read fairy stories."

George, his hands in his pockets, moved restlessly about the room. Marjorie stood gazing into the darkness that pressed upon the window panes.

"I wish," she said. "O, I *do* so wish——" she paused.

"That's what they all do in the fairy stories," observed George. "They wish. Anyone can——"

"Hush!" said Marjorie, suddenly.

## II

### THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE

FROM the darkness without arose the sound of a voice singing. Every word was clearly audible in the quiet room.

“Children, are you fain to wish?  
Once, twice, and again to wish?  
Never dream it vain to wish.  
It is ever gain to wish.”

The voice stopped suddenly, as though midway in the strange melody. Both the children went to the window, and George threw open a casement and peered into the dark, which was laced with falling snow, Marjorie leaning on his shoulder.

“There’s no one there,” said George. “Hi! Where are you?”

There was no answer. The children, shutting the window, drew back into the lighted room and looked at one another.

“Odd,” said George, turning a little pale. “The man—he must have been close outside the window. He—he must have heard us talking. And he’s not there.”

“O George,” said Marjorie, staring at him with

great eyes, "did you see? I looked—and there were no footsteps in the snow."

"Rubbish," said George. But he did not go again to the window.

Each knew that the other felt fear's cold finger; each knew that neither would confess to the sensation.

"Street-singers," remarked George, casually, turning away, "ought not to be allowed. I wonder Aunt Eliza wasn't after him. She's death on musicians."

The door opened, and there entered a little old lady, holding herself extremely upright. She was dressed all in black, and her dress was confusedly ornamented with little black beads and spangles. Over her shoulders she wore a grey shawl. Her lips met in a severe line; the gaze of her dark, lustrous eyes was direct; lips and eyes conveyed a challenge. They defied the world even to suggest that Aunt Eliza ever could, would, or should do, say, or think anything which was not the absolute and finished correct article. In one hand she bore a bundle of green stems and leaves.

"I thought," said Aunt Eliza, with an icy kind of conversational lightness, "I thought I heard my name as I approached the door. When I was a little girl, I was told that listeners—even unwilling listeners—never hear any good of themselves. Is that true, I wonder?"

"We heard a man singing just outside the window," said Marjorie, carefully, "and we wondered you hadn't spoken to him."



"A man singing? My dear, are you quite sure you are not mistaken? I have just this minute—quite against my rules—purchased these leaves of a poor man at the door. Had he been singing, I must certainly have heard him."

"O no," broke in George, aggressively. "We just made it up to see what you would say. We made up the words of the song too."

'Children, are you fain to wish?  
Once, twice, and again to wish?  
Never dream it vain to wish.  
It is——'

I've forgotten the rest."

"George, you forget yourself, I think, do you not?" said Aunt Eliza. "It is quite time your new governess were here," she added, with an artificial brightness.

"Why aren't we to have any holidays, then?" demanded George.

"You know why, George."

"I swear I don't."

"Your language, my dear boy," said Aunt Eliza, with contained severity, "would prove to me that I was right to impose a little extra strictness upon you, even if I had not been sure I was right, already. When I was a little girl such expressions were never heard in the family circle. You know as well as I do—both of you—that your father is not rich, and that you will have to earn your own living when you are older. In order to fit yourself for the task, you

must work hard now while you have the opportunity. Else it will be too late. Ah, those words—too late.”

Like an echo, the voice without, strong and clear, struck up again :

“ Too late, too late ! Not yet too late  
To rub the wrong figures from off the slate ;  
But beware lest you lose in this world of pain  
The joy that never can come again.”

All three turned towards the dark window.

“ Who is that ? ” said Aunt Eliza, angrily.

“ We—we don’t know,” said Marjorie, nervously.

“ It’s—it’s some one who passes by and doesn’t leave any footmarks.”

“ Stuff and nonsense,” cried the old lady, going close to the window and peering out. “ There’s no one there.”

“ There wasn’t before,” said George, with a chuckle.

“ Before what ? ”

“ Before you came in,” said George.

Aunt Eliza eyed him suspiciously. “ This perpetual singing in the streets is disgraceful,” she said. “ Let it be a warning to you of the fruits of idleness. No doubt that poor man——”

“ There wasn’t a man,” Marjorie interrupted.

“ He wasn’t there,” repeated George, doggedly.

“ That will do, children. That is quite enough,” said Aunt Eliza, falling back upon her last defences. “ Little things please little minds. When I was a little girl I was never allowed to argue with my

elders. Now help me to arrange these leaves tastefully."

George, considering that so trifling an occupation was an affair for women, stood staring gloomily out of the window; while his sister, ever the more amenable, unloosed the dried grass that bound the stems.

"What's this called, Aunt Eliza?" asked Marjorie, holding up a green sprig with long narrow leaves and bell-shaped pods.

Her Aunt, always dutifully ready to import information, scrutinised the cutting.

"Dear me, what a curious leaf. It looks quite foreign. Now I come to think of it, the poor man from whom I bought the bundle looked foreign too. I believed he mentioned the name—yes. It was Sesame."

### III

#### “ OPEN SESAME ”

“ OPEN Sesame,” muttered George.

“ What did you say, George ? ”

“ Only a quotation, Aunt.”

“ Do not let me hear any more quotations, unless they are to the point, if you please. As you are not taking any part in the help your sister is rendering to me, it would be a useful exercise for you to fetch the dictionary and to look out the names and properties of Sesame. Thus,” added Aunt Eliza, brightly, “ we shall all learn something.”

George, with studied deliberation, went to the bookcase, which stood parallel with the door. As he stood with the volume in his hand, the door opened silently and a head appeared. It wore a red cap in which was stuck a feather. George had but time to receive a momentary impression of very bright eyes and a friendly smile ere the wearer of the cap, with a nod, vanished.

“ Hullo ! I say—” cried George, staring at the closed door.

Aunt Eliza and Marjorie, whose backs were turned towards the door, turned swiftly.

“ What is the matter, George ? ” demanded his Aunt.

“ Nothing,” returned George, still staring.

“ Nonsense. Why do you look so startled ? ”

“ A man opened the door and—and looked in,” said George.

“ A man ! ”

With courageous promptitude Aunt Eliza opened the door.

In the light of the gas burning in the fanlight of the front door there was the hat-stand, Mr Crotchett’s second-best hat hanging on the peg ; there were the umbrellas and sticks ; the defaced blotches on the wall-paper, which represented blocks of marble ; and the hole in the oil-cloth on the floor. From below stairs came a faint clatter of plates.

“ There’s no one,” said Aunt Eliza.

“ No,” said George.

Something in his tone persuaded his Aunt that he was jesting.

“ One of the tricks you have learned at school, no doubt,” she said, acidly. “ I cannot understand what has come over you this evening, George.”

“ I can’t, either,” murmured the boy. He sat down at the table and opened the dictionary, glancing now and again at the door.

“ Bring your books, Marjorie, and look over the work of the term,” said Aunt Eliza, “ while I finish putting the leaves in water.”

Marjorie, wearing an expression of hopeless resignation, began very slowly to take the books one by one from her satchel. Suddenly the mysteri-

ous voice began to sing again; and the three persons in the room were stricken rigid. Sang the voice :

“ O children, dear children, take heed of your books,  
For they're wiser, you know, than the meadows and brooks  
Where we wait for you, children, by night and by day,  
We are lonely without you—O come out to play ! ”

“ There you are ! ” cried George, his voice rising to falsetto in his excitement. “ Now call me a liar ! ”

Marjorie, recoiling, clutched his shoulder. Aunt Eliza, with a visible effort, maintained her composure.

“ George and Marjorie ! I am ashamed of you. It is nothing but a street singer. I shall certainly inform the police. Marjorie, go on with your work. George, read aloud, distinctly, the definition of Sesame.”

Marjorie sat down very close to the boy, who, still staring at the window, paid no heed.

“ George ! ”

“ What ? ” said George, starting.

His Aunt firmly repeated her instructions, and George, pausing at every word to glance about him, began to read aloud.

“ ‘ Also called Gingelly.’ What a rum name. Here's another quotation—to the point. It's by a man called Ruskin : ‘ That old enchanted Arabian grain, the Sesame, which opens doors ’—why, that's what the man did just now.”

“ Yes—the Fairy Man who passes by ! ” cried

Marjorie, then shrank under the stern gaze of her Aunt.

“ Silence ! ” said Aunt Eliza. “ I will not have this nonsense. When I was a little girl—— ”

Her favourite sentence was cut off, for the voice without rose again, in a high mocking chant—

“ When Eliza was a little girl, she did as she was told,  
She never messed her pinafore, she was as good as gold,  
She never heard the fairies call, she couldn't if she tried ;  
She did so many lessons that she often sat and cried.”

The two children, springing to their feet, broke into laughter, and suddenly checking themselves, fell into a terrified silence, gazing at Aunt Eliza, who had risen likewise, and stood with clenched hands.

“ How dare you ! ” she cried.

“ It wasn't us,” said George.

“ It was the Man who passes by,” said Marjorie.

“ You are playing a trick—most ungentlemanly and *most* unladylike,” retorted her Aunt angrily. Marching resolutely to the window, she opened it, looked out, shut it again, and seated herself in the armchair beside the fire.

“ I suppose,” observed Aunt Eliza, with the terrifying calm of controlled fury, “ you are trying to see how far you can go with me. I am not easily put out, you will find. George ! Continue reading, if you please, where you left off.”

“ Certainly,” returned George, loudly. In a high unnatural voice he read :—

“ ‘The Sesame plant is endowed with magic virtues by the Arabs—’ ” On the word the voice chimed in :—

“ The Arabs knew a thing or two which Aunt Eliza doesn't, If you say 'Must' with 'Sesame' it's no use saying 'Mustn't.'

Now if you want your aged Aunt to take a little nap, Say, 'Go to sleep, O Sesame,' and drop it in her lap.”

“ What's that ? ” cried Aunt Eliza.

On the instant, George, snatching the twig of Sesame from the table, tossed it into his Aunt's lap.

“ Go to sleep, O Sesame ! ” shouted both the children.

“ You mustn't,” said Aunt Eliza. But even as she spoke, she sank slowly back into the chair, and her eyelids fluttered.

“ You must,” cried both the children. “ Sesame, sesame—go to sleep ! ”

“ Yes, my dears,” said Aunt Eliza, drowsily. Her eyes closed, she breathed lightly and regularly, lying very still. The children, drawing near, contemplated the sleeping figure with solemn eyes.



#### IV

#### THE STRANGER

"Now we've done it," said George, speaking low.

"I *told* you it was magic," said Marjorie, in the same tone.

"Seems to work, doesn't it?" said George.

"Good old Sesame."

"It was the Fairy Man as well, I know it was," said Marjorie.

"He looked in. I saw him. She wouldn't believe me," said George.

"I wish—I wish he would come again."

Marjorie spoke in a trembling voice. The two turned towards the door and, with a catch at their hearts, perceived it to open. There stood the slender figure of a man, smiling upon them. He was dressed in a long brown tunic, reaching to his knees, and brown hose. On his head he wore a close scarlet cap, in which was stuck a bright green feather. His high shoes were of soft brown leather, slit at the ankles. In his hand he held a silver pipe, a flageolet. The skin of his face was clear red and brown like a ripe apple; his eyes had the gleam of grey water under a grey sky.

"Wish you well, children," said the stranger.

His voice was beguiling like music ; yet it could not be likened to any music ; for, like all beautiful voices, it existed alone.

The stranger moved easily and soundlessly to the table.

“ What ? ” said he. “ Lesson books ? Lesson books in the holidays ? Now I think holidays are made for finding a way to—other things. Don’t you ? ”

In the direct gaze of the stranger’s eyes, George, in spite of his amazement, was impelled to answer.

“ What things ? ” said he ; and his words sounded to himself as though spoken by some one else.

The stranger, fingering the stops of his silver pipe, blew upon it a little wandering air. Then he sang :—

“ Have you ever seen in daylight the things you see in dreams ?

Have you ever in the starlight beheld the fairy gleams  
From another world about you, invisible like air ?

O come away with me, dears, and I will take you there.”

The singer paused, and looked at the children gravely.

“ Well, will you come ? ”

“ If you please,” said Marjorie, “ who are you ? ”

The stranger stood upright, and stretched forth his hand, and his beguiling voice filled the room.

“ I am he that brings joy where no joy is. I know where springs the Water of Life, and where dwells the bird whose song is eternal youth. I guide the Younger Son to his fortune ; I know the way to the foot of the rainbow, where the Pot of Gold is buried. Why,” he broke off, with a sudden

thrilling change of tone, letting fall his outstretched hand, "you have read of me in the fairy stories."

"I know," said George, boldly. "But how can we tell if you are real—really real?"

"Try me."

"How can we try you?" asked Marjorie, eagerly.

"Come with me."

"Yes, but I say, where to?" said George, cautiously.

"Did you not wish," replied the stranger, "for 'a way of escape from all these horrid things?' I can show you the way. It leads to the country of That Which Has Been. Why," he added, pointing with his silver pipe to the picture on the wall, "you have a picture of my country—and very like it is, too."

"That's a picture of a time ever so long ago, by a man who only imagined it," said Marjorie.

"He saw it, or how could he have painted it? And as for time—there is no time in my country. Why, even in your own lives, nearly half of each life passes without time."

"Does it?" George asked, cautiously. "When?"

"When you're asleep," said the stranger. "Some people are only awake when they are asleep, and some people are only asleep when they are awake."

"I wish I knew if I was awake now," said Marjorie.

"Surely," replied the stranger. "I came to you, in answer to your wish, while you were awake, on purpose. I like people to accept my invitation

with their eyes open. Then, when they're asleep, I call for them."

"O, you mean dreams," said George, with a touch of scorn.

"Do I?"

"What do you mean?" asked Marjorie, earnestly.

The stranger set his pipe to his lips and played a fantastic marching melody. The two children drew closer to him.

"I mean," said he, "that I can take you by the way of escape to the other country. Why, you have travelled to it before, by another road, when you read the stories of *That Which Has Been*, what time Aunt Eliza is safely downstairs—I know, you see."

"But when we shut the book things come back and worry one just the same," said Marjorie, wistfully. "Is there any place in the—the Other Country, which would——" she paused.

"Which would show you how to cure *all these horrid things*?" the stranger interposed. "Yes, I can take you there. Don't you believe me?"

"Yes," said Marjorie, drawing a long breath.

"No," said George, bluntly. "But if you'll come to fetch us when we're asleep, I'll believe you," he added.

"When will you come?" asked Marjorie, eagerly.

"To-night?"

"To-night."

"And will you bring Daddy and—and all the others—Aunt Eliza, and the new governess, and Cook, and Isabel?"

"I will, if you wish it. You must wish, you know, or I can do nothing."

"*I wish,*" said Marjorie, solemnly.

"Don't forget to wake your Aunt," said the stranger.

The children turned towards the sleeping figure in the armchair, and when they glanced round again the stranger was gone. They ran out of the room, opened the front door, and looked out, but the street was empty. A faint strain of music, like the echo of the marching tune the stranger played, sounded in the quiet air, and fell silent.

Returning to the room, the two children looked at each other in silence.

"We'd better wake Aunt Eliza," said Marjorie.

"Yes, but how?"

"I know," returned the girl.

Going softly to the sleeper, she lifted the sprig of sesame.

"Wait a minute," said George. "Directly she begins to wake, let's dash up to bed."

Marjorie nodded, retreating to the door. Holding it open, George standing beside her, she pronounced the spell. "Wake up, Sesame," said Marjorie, her voice trembling.

Instantly after, Aunt Eliza stirred, and her eyelids fluttered. The next moment the children had shut the door behind them and were swiftly climbing the stairs.

". . . So let us hear no more about it," said Aunt Eliza, as though continuing her admonition where it had been interrupted. Sitting firmly

upright and gazing into the fire, she went on : "As you both know very well, I enjoy a joke as well as anyone ; but I must insist that it be kept within the bounds of good taste and moderation. When I was a little girl——"

"What happened then, Lizzie?" said a quiet voice behind her.

V

TO INCULCATE HAPPINESS

THE head of the household, Mr Charles Crotchett, hearing as he entered the hall his sister's voice in the school-room, opened the door and came quietly in to remark his sister, sitting bolt upright and talking in a rapid even tone to the empty room.

"When I was a little girl——"

"What happened then, Lizzie?" said Charles Crotchett.

"Why, when I was a little girl," repeated his sister, half turning in her seat and eyeing him with a curious fixed look, "I did as I was told, I never messed my pinafore, I was as good as gold. I never heard the fairies call, I couldn't if I tried. And I did so many lessons that it's perfectly true, although of course I am ashamed of such foolish conduct now, I often sat and cried—I did."

Mr Crotchett took off his lustreless silk hat, and ran his fingers through his shock of fine grey hair, so that it stood erect, while he surveyed his sister with arching lips, his flexible eyebrows moving up and down. Suddenly his whole face lightened, and he broke into a fit of laughter.

"I beg your pardon, Lizzie," he said. "I really—"

something in what you said struck me as comic. I didn't mean to laugh."

Aunt Eliza gazed at him, the fixed look in her eyes giving place to an expression of recognition.

"Oh, is that you, Charles?" she said, rising to her feet. "I did not hear you come in. I must have been dozing by the fire."

Her brother's mobile face changed to a look of anxiety.

"Are you sure you're feeling quite well, Lizzie?" he asked earnestly.

"Perfectly robust, I thank you," returned Aunt Eliza, with dignity. "I trust that a momentary yielding to fatigue—caused perhaps by the high spirits of the children—is not a sign of ill-health."

"Beautifully expressed, Lizzie. I hope the children haven't been troublesome. By the way, where are they?"

Miss Crotchett looked about her, as if in surprise.

"They were here just now. I'll go and see. I will see about your supper at the same time."

"No, please don't," said Mr Crotchett, his face suddenly lined and careworn. "I was so late to-night that I had a bun and a glass of milk as I came along, and I—I'm not hungry. Besides, shan't have time for anything else. The—new governess is coming to see me," he added, with a touch of hesitation.

Miss Crotchett paused, her hand upon the door.

"Just as you feel inclined, Charles, of course." Aunt Eliza contrived in those simple words to convey both disapproval and a dutiful resignation.



"Perhaps a little something later." She paused. "In which apartment would you prefer to see your visitor? My own little room is of course at your disposal. I have a little work to do elsewhere and——"

"No, no, no," interrupted her brother, impatiently. "I won't have you turned out. Show her in here—show her in here. She will have to live in here, if she comes, won't she?"

"If she comes?" repeated Aunt Eliza. "Do I understand that you have not already engaged the lady in question?"

"Of course I haven't. How could I, without consulting you?"

"I am obliged to you, Charles, for your consideration. I did not know. I shall of course be happy to see the person, if you will send for me."

Her brother looked at the composed little figure, opened his mouth as if to speak, shut it again, and turned away, to stand with his back to the fire and his hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"Look here, Lizzie, don't let's have any—any misunderstanding about this business. You suggested having a daily governess in the holidays. I think it's a d—— a pity. Why shouldn't the children have their holidays? Of course I know they don't do much at school, and all that. Well, no more did I. Who does? You did, I know—you've just told me so." He broke off with a chuckle, instantly suppressed. "Well, what I mean is, I gave way to your wishes. No doubt you're perfectly right. Goodness knows that I

haven't made such a success of my life that I'm to set myself up as a judge. So there it is. I advertised, as you know—'Wanted, a governess for the holidays, for boy and girl, aged 15 and 17 respectively, to inculcate'—your favourite word, Lizzie—'to inculcate happiness.'"

"What!" cried Miss Crotchett. "Do you mean to tell me that you actually advertised in the public Press for a governess to make the children happy?"

"Well, you don't want her to make them miserable, do you?" inquired her brother.

Miss Crotchett closed the door and stood beside the table.

"Really, Charles, I am astonished at you. Accustomed as I am to your incorrigible frivolity—yes, frivolity—I did *not* expect that in a question vitally affecting the welfare of the children—oh, it's intolerable! Do you mean to say that you specified no qualifications on the part of the person you desired to engage?"

"They're included in the one sentence, Lizzie. Surely you must see that. I thought it a masterly piece of condensation. Happiness consists in obedience, order, work, and all that. You've often told me so yourself. Well, then, in order to obtain happiness for the children, she—whom you call the Person—must enforce all these virtues. There you are. Besides, long advertisements are frightfully expensive."

"You know perfectly well, Charles, that had you shown to me that absurd advertisement I should

have expressed my strongest disapprobation," returned Miss Crotchett, icily.

Her brother, looking at her from under his black brows, made no reply; and the old lady continued.

"The mischief, however, is done. I am only surprised that any respectable person should have answered your advertisement. What, may I inquire, is her name?"

"Well, to tell you the honest truth, I don't know. She didn't give any name."

"An anonymous letter?" cried Miss Crotchett. "An anonymous person—or, since you seem to dislike the word, woman—coming to call upon you? This, Charles, is your house. I cannot prevent you from doing in it what you like. But in justice to myself——"

"Come, come, Lizzie," interrupted Mr Crotchett, persuasively. "There's no harm done yet. You can see the girl for yourself—if she is a girl. We needn't have her if you don't like her. I think you ought to bear in mind that I should never have consented to a holiday governess, had it not been that I felt that her presence would relieve you—you who do so much for the children."

Aunt Eliza visibly wavered.

"I know you mean well, Charles," she said, judicially. "I have never doubted the excellence of your intentions. Since you crave my assistance I can but do my best to help you in this trouble, as in others."

And with that Miss Crotchett quitted the room.

Her brother chuckled noiselessly as she closed the door behind her, then he frowned.

"O dear me," he said aloud. "O dear, O dear, O dear. Well that's over, anyway. Where are the children? Where the devil are they? Driven out by Lizzie's infernal tongue, I suppose."

He wandered aimlessly about the room, brooding. Presently he took a green sprig from the vase on the table, and picked absently at its leaves.

"I wish," he said, "I wish I could see my way clear."

As he spoke, he heard the front door bell ring.

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## VI

### THE NEW GOVERNESS

WITH a double tap upon the door, Cook entered the room, closing the door behind her, to perceive the master of the house seated at the table, apparently absorbed in one of the children's lesson-books. Thus did Mr Crotchett devise to conceal a little trepidation, of which he was sensible.

"A lady wishing to see you, sir," said Cook. Her tone implied disapproval. "Miss Crotchett said as she was to be shown in here. Is that right, sir? Excuse me asking."

"Quite right," said Mr Crotchett, with a forced alacrity. "Er—what did you say her name was?"

"She didn't give no name, sir." Cook, her breathing rather laboured, implied an increased disapproval. "She said you would know who it was."

"Of course. I had forgotten," said Mr Crotchett, lightly. "Show her in, please, Cook."

Advancing to meet the lady as she entered, Mr Crotchett stopped short.

"You!" he cried.

"Me," she replied, with a smile.

When she smiled, her dark eyes narrowed at the

corners. They were trusting eyes, which looked at the world as though they perceived the good in it alone; and as though some seven and twenty years of observation had but confirmed the faith that the good was always there. When her face was in repose, the lips set firmly together, drooping a little at the corners, as though she knew what it was to endure. Now, as Mr Crotchett, momentarily silent, unconsciously set his hair on end with one hand, her eyes widened a little, and her lips closed in an anxious line.

"I—I beg your pardon," said Charles Crotchett. "I was—to tell you the honest truth—I was expecting someone else. But I am tremendously glad to see you. Won't you sit down?"

The lady seated herself in the armchair and loosened the fur about her neck.

"Then I'm in time," said she, unexpectedly. "I am so glad."

"Heaps of time," returned Mr Crotchett, hastily. "She hasn't come yet. Besides, she can wait a few minutes, or see my sister, or—or anything. I am expecting a holiday governess," he added.

"I am that holiday governess," said the lady. "Or rather, I will be if you like."

"You!" cried Mr Crotchett again.

"'To inculcate happiness,' I think you said," observed the lady, gravely.

"But how——" he began.

"How did I come to apply for the post? It's quite simple. You know how we discussed the matter—on general principles. Then I saw the

advertisement, and I knew it must be yours. So I wrote to you—you replied—and here I am.”

“So you are the Anonymous Lady,” said Mr Crotchett. “How splendid. It’s too good to be true.”

“I didn’t mean to make a mystery of it,” said the lady. “But you and I had not known each other’s names; and I thought——” she paused.

“I know,” Crotchett broke in eagerly. “You thought that if I did not answer the letter, or declined to make an appointment, nothing would be altered.”

“It is really rather absurd, isn’t it?” she went on. “But we are both absurd people. What I really thought was that if, having refused my application, you afterwards discovered who I was—not that it’s a secret—there would have to be explanations.”

“And I hate explanations,” said Crotchett. “So unnecessary. That was the charm of our meeting. We just met—and just talked about interesting things. You remember the first time? It was in Saint Paul’s Churchyard, and you were sitting on the bench all among the joyless flower-beds and the dingy sparrows, and the music was sounding from within, and I said, ‘Here the two worlds join.’”

“And I,” joined in the lady, “asked you what you meant. And you said that when men had climbed so high from the dust as to build a Cathedral and to discourse such music, it was extremely odd that they continued to grovel in shops and offices and ride in omnibuses.”

“And you said that the two things, the two worlds, had always existed side by side, and that perhaps each was necessary to the other,” said Mr Crotchett. “And then—and then—I went back to the office. How long ago it seems.”

“A year,” said the lady, smiling.

“And now, I suppose, it’s over,” said Crotchett, dreamily.

“Well, I’ve come about the situation, you know,” said she.

“O yes, of course. The situation,” said Mr Crotchett. “But that’s settled. I mean, if you really would like it. But you haven’t seen the children yet. Or,” he added, “my sister.”

“Nor do you know who I am?” she observed. “It is soon told—like the beginning of a fairy story. Her name was Mary Grey; she was an orphan; and she lived with her uncle, for whom she kept house. Now her uncle was an old man, rich, and a widower; and Mary Grey grew tired of his great dark house and his troops of servants and his whims and fancies; and particularly was she tired of leading a useless life. So she determined to become a holiday governess. And having a little money of her own, she could afford to please herself. That’s how it begins.”

Charles Crotchett listened with a profound attention. At the word money, his brows wrinkled.

“I forgot,” he said. “I can only offer you a miserable salary. I ought to have begun with that.”

“Never mind,” said Mary Grey. “It will do



very well. Now will you introduce me to your sister, and may I see the children ? ”

“ Excuse me for a moment—I’ll fetch them,” said Mr Crotchett.

Left alone, Miss Grey wandered about the room, picked a piece of green stuff from the table, absently fastened it in her dress, and stood looking at the dim picture on the wall, until Crotchett returned.

“ I’m extremely sorry,” he said, “ but I can’t find anyone. The servants say that the children went out, and that their Aunt went out to find them. It seems that they had been misbehaving—my sister set them down to their books, and they went out of the room while she was asleep, so she ordered them to bed—without supper—and then they ran out—and she went out after them. It is very unfortunate. These things are always happening, and I can’t see my way clear to prevent them. I wonder where they are ? ”

As he stood bewildered and distressed, a voice without rose clear and strong, singing :—

“ Upstairs, downstairs, I wonder where they are ?  
Call them, call them, call them near and far,  
Threaten them with punishment, dock them of their  
dinner !  
That’s the way to treat them, naughty little sinners——”

“ What in the world——” exclaimed Mr Crotchett, and went, like the rest of the family before him, to peer out of the window, Miss Grey beside him.

“ Nobody there,” said Mr Crotchett. “ I can see nothing—as usual.”

"Let us look outside," suggested Miss Grey.

"How resourceful you are," said Charles Crotchett, with admiration. Standing on the steps outside the front door, the two looked and listened. The little bare front garden, the street, were dark and empty.

"I shouldn't be anxious if I were you," said Mary Grey. "I don't know why, but I feel sure the children are quite safe and will come safely home."

"Do you really think so?" said Crotchett, in a tone of relief.

"I am generally right in these things," she replied, quietly. "Besides, there's a feeling—an air—I don't know how to describe it—about the house, which is not the feeling of trouble."

"Really?" repeated Crotchett. "I don't know how that can be, for there's always trouble of some sort—you know, I never can see my way clear. I think it must be your coming which has made the difference."

"And I must be going," said Miss Grey. "I promised to be back for dinner. And I must break it to my uncle that I am going to be a holiday governess."

"I hope he won't object," said Charles, anxiously.

"I will come to-morrow, then," returned Miss Grey, ignoring the remark.

"But I don't like your going back alone," said Crotchett. "It is late—you may lose your way. I would ask to be allowed to accompany you, but I hardly like to leave the house. If only there were a policeman, even. I can't see one anywhere."

"I like policemen very much. I feel sure, as they meditate all night in the silent streets of a city asleep, they become poets without perhaps knowing it. But I can take care of myself."

"I know," said Mr Crotchett. "All the same, I wish there *was* a policeman. I could ask him if he had seen the children, and my sister, and who it was singing—really a most extraordinary occurrence—and then he could put you on your way. I wish," he repeated, "there was a policeman."

A figure appeared at the front gate so suddenly that both Mr Crotchett and his companion started, approached to the foot of the low flight of steps, and looked up. In the light flowing from the open doorway the policeman's eyes shone with a singular brightness, and his white teeth gleamed as he smiled in a friendly way.

"O, constable," began Mr Crotchett, a little confused because he did not recognise the officer, who, indeed, seemed in some nameless respect to be unlike any other policeman, "er—good evening. I—I did not hear you coming."

"I am wearing the shoes of silence," said the policeman.

"O, quite—the india-rubber shoes. That explains it. By the way, did you hear anyone singing just now? Just outside my window."

"I was singing, sir," replied the policeman, calmly.

"O indeed," said Mr Crotchett, faintly.

"It is not usually permitted on duty," said the policeman. "But I have special permission to sing, provided that it is in the public interest. But I

am not allowed to sing *ordinary* songs. I make my own songs."

Miss Grey laughed delightedly.

"I told you so," she said. "Mr Policeman, you are a poet."

Charles Crotchett clutched his hair with both hands.

"But you sang about my children," he cried, in desperation.

"Only in the public interest," responded the policeman. "They told me all about it, you see," he added, with the air of explaining everything.

"Then you know where they are?" demanded Crotchett, eagerly.

"I know where they are. They are quite safe—and happy. If you will allow me, I will take you to them. But first I must be permitted to see this lady on her way," said the policeman, respectfully but firmly.

"Please do," cried Miss Grey, before Mr Crotchett could interpose. "I knew the children were safe. Good night."

The policeman saluted. The next moment he was striding noiselessly away at the side of Miss Grey, and the two were speedily lost to view in the darkness.

## VII

### THE WRATH OF UNCLE JONAS

It seemed to Mary Grey, walking beside the policeman, that never before had she traversed streets and squares so easily and swiftly. She was conscious of passing from unfrequented streets to bright and roaring thoroughfares, crossing them in a moment, while the whole moving mass of omnibuses and carriages and vans stopped instantaneously before her companion's uplifted hand; and again threading by-ways, and pursuing straight roads, destitute of passengers, and starred with lamps marching away into the darkness. And all the time she was trying to think of some appropriate remark with which to begin a conversation with the dark figure moving soundlessly beside her; but the words would not come. She was sensible of some confusion of mind, but it did not distress her, because it was accompanied by a peculiar pleasant exhilaration. And suddenly she was standing in the gloomy, columned portico of her uncle's house.

"Thank you so very much," said Miss Grey. "Now are you going to fetch the children?"

"Presently," said the policeman. "They are resting now. They are so tired of this world."

"Poor dears, I wish I could see them," said Miss Grey.

"So you shall," said the policeman. "I will call for you."

As he spoke the door opened, and Miss Grey turned towards it. Looking round again she saw no policeman. Entering the house she perceived the parlourmaid coming towards her.

"O, it's you, miss," said the girl, who seemed surprised. "I thought I heard a step and came to make sure. Did you ring, miss?"

"No," said Miss Grey, absently.

The maid started as the door clicked-to behind her.

"That's a funny thing, too," she said. "I shut it myself, not five minutes ago, and put down the latch, same as the master said."

"Where is the master?" asked Miss Grey, without heeding the girl.

"He's half-way through dinner, miss," the girl replied. "He said he wouldn't wait no longer, though it was barely the time. Shall I bring a tray to your room?"

"Please," said Miss Grey, considering the point. "Yes, that will be best. And tell Mr Screwby that I will join him at dessert."

She went to her sitting-room and seated herself by the fire. She had a conflict before her, and desired to prepare herself for victory. Uncle Jonas Screwby disliked any change exceedingly. The slightest disturbance of routine vexed him. Every morning except Sunday he breakfasted at eight

o'clock. From half-past eight to nine he smoked a cigar and read the newspaper in his study. At nine he departed to the City; where, as the firm of Screwby, Gritten, Pooley & Booch, wholesale dry goods merchants, he was a very important person; especially as Gritten, Pooley & Booch were merely disembodied fictions; for Screwby had worn them down or bought them out. Every evening he returned at six o'clock, when he expected his niece to be seated beside the silver tea-tray in the vast drawing-room with the gilt chairs and the cut-glass chandeliers. At eight he dined; prolonging that meal until half-past nine. From half-past nine to half-past ten he sat over his wine in the dining-room. He then retired to his study, where he smoked one cigar. Then he went to bed.

At tea-time he invariably asked Mary Grey what she had been doing during the day; nor was he satisfied until he had extracted from her an account of every hour. As he seldom interfered with her occupations, Mary decided that his motive was a not unkindly curiosity. But he always regarded it as a failure in her duty if she were not present to pour out his tea; and in these circumstances she tried to pacify him during dinner.

To-night she had committed the double offence of absenting herself from tea and of being late for dinner. It was a bad beginning; but much worse must follow. Meditating upon her course of action, Mary ate and drank in order to fortify herself for the contest.

When she entered the dining-room the old man

was seated at the head of the dark, shining mahogany, a decanter in front of him. His face was long and querulous, like the reflection of a face in a table-spoon; there were little pouches under his eyes; he wore a straggling grey beard, and a few parti-coloured locks were plastered across his narrow skull.

"I hope you have been enjoying yourself," he said, grimly.

"Very much, thank you, Uncle Jonas," Mary replied cheerfully. "I am sorry to have come in so late. I hope your tea was ready for you."

Uncle Jonas put the remark away with a gesture of his bony hand.

"I made no complaint," he said. "You know what my wishes are. You must of course have had an important engagement; though I cannot imagine what it could have been. May I be enlightened?"

"Of course," replied Mary. "I went to see about a situation. It suited me—and I took it."

The old man stared at her for nearly a minute in silence.

"You did what?" he inquired, with a dangerous composure. "I did not quite follow you. Perhaps you would have the kindness to repeat what you said."

"I went out," repeated Mary, in her clear, even tones, "to find a situation. I saw the advertisement in the paper. I called at the address given. The place suited me. So I took it."



"I do not recall," said Uncle Jonas, "that you consulted me before taking this, ah—extraordinary step."

As Mary remained silent, the old man rapped upon the table with his knuckles.

"Did you or did you not?" he barked.

"Consult you? Certainly not," returned Mary, boldly.

Uncle Jonas filled his glass with a steady hand.

"Dear me," he went on, in his hard, arrogant voice. "Dear me. The idea of consulting the relative who is responsible for you did, I understand, occur to you, and you rejected it. Am I right?"

"If you insist—yes," replied Mary.

"Point number one," continued Uncle Jonas, staring at her with his heavy-lidded eyes, "you deliberately decide to ignore me, for the reason, of course, that you knew I should disapprove of your intention. That is done and cannot be undone. Point number two: your reason for contemplating such an action? I presume," he added, "that you have a coherent reason?"

"Several reasons, with which I need not trouble you. The decisive reason, however, is that I thought it right," returned Mary, steadily.

Uncle Jonas bowed ironically. "Of course," he said. "How could I suppose you would do anything you thought wrong. Hah? Well—I am ready to be convinced. Proceed."

He leaned back in his chair, and still steadily gazing at her, lifted the glass to his lips.

“Let me say, first,” began Mary, “that I do really and truly appreciate your kindness to me during these years, since I lost my parents. I am really and truly sorry to do anything which—which you dislike. If you will believe this, it will make what I have to say easier.”

She paused. The old man maintained his fixed attitude in silence, and she continued.

“I am very glad if I can be of use to you, in return for all you have done for me. You generously give me money, you give me the use of this great house. But the little I can do for you—it is not much—does not justify me in wasting the better part of my life. I am lonely; I see no one; the duties of the house could be better done by a paid housekeeper; I am of no real use to anyone; and I am not happy. So I have resolved to begin again. Having thought it all over, what I propose is to engage in daily work, leaving here in the morning, returning at night. I will of course arrange that your comfort shall be secured.”

“I thank you,” said Uncle Jonas. “My comfort. Yes. I make no bones about it. I like comfort; I have earned it; I can pay for it; and I intend to have it. But I am not here to talk about myself, but about you. What is this daily task of which you speak?”

“It is a post of holiday governess.”

“And have you reflected what people will say about that? I can hear them at it. ‘Old Joe Screwby’s pretty niece going out as a daily governess—what?’ And all the rest of it.”

"I see no harm in that," said Mary, with the shadow of a smile.

"You don't? Well, I do. But we'll come to that presently. And to whom, I ask, are you engaged as a—a holiday governess?" said the old man, mouthing the words as though they were a dose of bitter medicine.

"A certain Mr Crotchett," replied Mary, flushing a little.

"Crotchett!" cried the old man. "Charles Crotchett? Where does he live? Maida Vale?"

"Yes," said Mary, wondering at her uncle's fury. "Is it wrong to live in Maida Vale?"

"Wrong!" shouted Uncle Jonas. He paused. "Do you happen to know who Charles Crotchett is?" he asked, with a return to his judicial tone. "I presume you inquired, before taking the situation?"

"No," said Mary. "Who is he?"

"Who is he? He's my clerk. And a very worthless clerk, too. Why, I keep him out of charity. You think I never give anything to charity. Who else would have kept Charles Crotchett all these days when I could get a better clerk at thirty shillings a week? And he has the—infernal insolence and presumption to engage my niece—his employer's niece—as his governess," raged Uncle Jonas.

"But he doesn't know who I am," cried Mary.

"Did he tell you that? How can he help knowing?"

"I am certain he knows nothing about me,"

persisted Mary, in great distress. "It was all my fault. I ought to have told him."

"Do you mean to tell me that he engaged a governess without knowing who she was or anything about her?"

"Exactly that," said Mary.

The old man gloomed at her, twisting his beard in his fingers. "I believe you. It would be like him. But all's one. I'll settle this business once for all."

He rose from the table, rang the bell, told the servant to send for a special messenger, and sat down to the writing-desk beside the fire-place.

"What are you going to do, uncle?" asked Mary, firmly.

"I'll talk to you presently," he returned, taking a cheque-book from a drawer, and laying it open in front of him. "This is business."

He took a sheet of paper and wrote deliberately; then he wrote a cheque, placed it with the paper in the envelope, which he sealed, and directed.

"Are you writing to Mr Crotchett?" asked Mary.

"Having finished that piece of business, I am now at liberty to reply to you. Yes. I have written to my clerk, Crotchett, informing him that my niece will be unable to fulfil her engagement, and discharging him from my service."

"Then you have done a wicked, cruel act," cried his niece.

"Hah," said Uncle Jonas, placidly spreading his hands to the fire. "I do what I think right, my girl."

Mary stood looking down upon the bent old figure, her colour darkening, her face suddenly stern.

"And what do you think I am going to do?" she said, quietly.

Uncle Jonas looked up at her under his grey eyebrows.

"Behave yourself," said he. "I've made it easy for you."

"You have indeed," retorted Mary, with a sudden anger that caused the old man to jerk his head back, as if she had struck him. "Do you think you can treat me like one of your poor clerks? Send that letter, and I leave your house."

"Here's a tragedy queen," cried Uncle Jonas. "These airs are no good with me, my girl. You'll do as you are bid."

"I mean it," said Mary.

For answer the old man pressed the bell.

"Here," he said to the servant, "give that to the messenger when he comes." And he gave to her the letter.

"He's here, sir," said the maid.

Mary followed the girl to the door.

"Good night, uncle," she said.

In the hall stood a messenger-boy. He seemed so unusually tall that Mary's eyes were attracted to his face.

"Shall I pay him, miss?" asked the maid.

"Run and fetch my purse from my room," said Mary quickly.

The messenger-boy, as the girl departed, smiled.

"I thought you were the—the policeman," whispered Mary.

"So I was," said the messenger-boy.

When the maid came downstairs the hall was empty.

Mr Screwby did not believe that his niece meant what she said, although she had told him that she did mean it. So he sat where he was for an hour, smoking his evening cigar, pleasing himself with the reflection that Mary was considering the situation in her room, and never doubting that she would submit to his will. At the end of the hour he sent for the maid, when he learned that Miss Mary was to be found nowhere in the house. Then old Jonas set his mouth; sent for a four-wheeler; told the servants that he had gone to fetch Miss Mary from the house of a friend, and drove away towards Maida Vale.

## VIII

### BAD NEWS

WHEN Miss Grey departed with that highly singular policeman, and Charles Crotchett was left alone, his mind was so perplexed with conflicting emotions that he was unable to think clearly ; or, as he said, to see his way. Anxiety concerning the children and his sister, surprise and delight at the appearance of Miss Mary Grey, amazement at the conduct of the singing policeman : these sensations so jostled one another in his brain as to paralyse his power of thought. He felt that he ought to do something at once ; but what that something ought to be he could not imagine.

Returning to his arm-chair beside the fire he lit a pipe and sat down to consider the matter. The only coherent reflection which emerged was that all depended on the singing policeman. He seemed to know the children ; a knowledge which, if he patrolled the neighbourhood, it was not improbable he should obtain. More surprising was his apparent acquaintance with their Aunt, who was extremely distant in her behaviour to those whom she called the common people. It was extraordinary, too, that the singing policeman knew, or said he knew,

where the children, pursued by Aunt Eliza, had gone. Why, then had he not said where they were? And why, without waiting for the information, had Miss Grey suddenly consented to go with the singing policeman? Revolving these matters Charles Crotchett set them in order one against another, and beside each he placed a large mental note of interrogation. But until the singing policeman returned, Mr Crotchett perceived that he was as far from comprehending the situation as ever.

Then he tried the common-sense explanation; which, as everyone knows, is always tried in such circumstances. After all, what was there so extraordinary in the course of events? The children had been rebellious; it was natural on the first night of the holidays that they should revolt against their aunt, who (as she often boasted) never relaxed her rule. In order to frighten Aunt Eliza they had run out of the house, pretending to run away; they had met their friend the policeman, and had told him the situation, and where they were going, and had made him promise to keep their destination a secret until a certain hour. Naturally enough, Aunt Eliza, who believed the streets to be full of lurking dangers, had pursued the children, and probably she had met the policeman, who had directed her to where they were. Then he came to Mr Crotchett to relieve his anxiety. But at this point Mr Crotchett was brought up against the fact that policemen on duty do not sing outside windows, and that this particular constable, alike in his singing, his conversation, and his countenance,



was frankly incredible. That sort of policeman simply did not occur. Charles Crotchett tried to tell himself that the policeman was a young constable, not yet properly broken in, with a taste for unusual action—in vain. It would not do. All the notes of interrogation remained.

The state of mind of a man confronted with the mysterious is simply a state of bewilderment. Either he is driven to try to discover the explanation, or he accepts the situation as a thing impossible to understand. Most persons begin by trying to discover the secret and end by accepting it as unknowable. Even those few with whom the discovery of truth is a passion, sooner or later arrive at a point at which they can see no further. Sometimes they make the mistake of assuming that because they can see nothing there is nothing there.

But there is no sensation so easily exhausted as the sensation of wonder. If a miracle were to occur : if upon a morning the sun forgot to rise ; people would be surprised and agitated for a day or two. Within a week they would have forgotten their amazement. Within a year they would have forgotten the miracle ; and if the most respectable old gentleman, sitting in his club one afternoon, were to relate his experience of the portent to fellow-members, who had not seen it, they would not believe him.

Charles Crotchett was not among those who continue to allow the whole mystery of this mysterious life to escape them, until they become incapable of

perceiving it ; and who, in default of those pure delights which the search for good things and beautiful things alone can give, betake themselves to those sensual pleasures which afford gross sensations and which at the same time kill (the scientific word is inhibit) thought. They take to golf, they play bridge, cultivate a taste for alcohol, smoke potent cigars, and they—but why continue ? And who shall cast the first stone at them ?

Not Charles Crotchett. He admired and envied the vigorous, bustling, practical persons who surged all about him in the City ; who seemed perfectly oblivious to everything except the things of the moment ; and who appeared to enjoy life to the full, without a scruple. When the enjoyment unaccountably failed, they drank a little something with a friend, and started again. But Charles lived in a different world : a world which was so very different from the concerns of Screwby, Gritten, Pooley & Booch, that Charles was only enabled to perform his duties in their sordid and unclean counting-house, by means of putting a strong constraint upon himself. He performed them conscientiously ; but Mr Jonas Screwby wanted more than that. He wanted enthusiasm and zeal ; and he did not get them from Mr Crotchett, the despised Charles, as he had told Mary Grey. It was not true, however, that he retained his services as an act of charity. He kept Charles Crotchett because he was absolutely reliable, honest as the skin between his brows, a faithful servant. But Charles knew that he was contemned by his master ;

and because of that knowledge a constant dread possessed him lest he should be dismissed, and thereby ruined. For who would employ a middle-aged clerk? The position galled him perpetually. He bore it for the sake of the two children and his sister. But for years he had been trying to discover a way out; and for years he had failed; and therefore it was that he said he could not see his way clear.

Insensibly his mind reverted to these things as he sat waiting for the return of the singing policeman. Living habitually in a world of his own perceptions, habitually endeavouring to pierce the surface of things, to detect their true significance, he had found so much that was strange, so much that differed entirely from common beliefs, that he no longer drew a sharp line between the credible and the incredible, the possible and the impossible. He knew too much, in fact. He knew that very few things are impossible; though there were many which (for some inscrutable reason) were not permitted. And it occurred to him, as he sat over the dying fire, that perhaps the coming of Mary Grey, and even the singular conduct of the policeman, might have something to do with the way out for which he had sought so long.

But, in the meantime, where were the children? He glanced anxiously at the clock. It was growing late. There came a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of Cook and Isabel.

"If you please, sir, might we speak to you?" said Cook.

At this ominous beginning, Mr Crotchett foreboded trouble.

"I and Isabel," continued Cook, "wishes to give a month's notice."

"Dear me," said Charles, uneasily. "Why, Cook, what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, sir, that I know of," returned Cook, implying that the question was injurious to her dignity. "We wish to give notice."

"I think it's time there was a change," put in Isabel, the pretty, dark-eyed house-parlourmaid. "Nothing else, sir. I am sure Cook and me will be very sorry to leave you, sir."

"Then why go?" inquired Charles.

Silence.

"There must be some reason, you know," he continued. "You wouldn't want a change if you were quite happy as you were."

Another silence. Cook looked at Isabel, and Isabel looked at Cook, and then both stared straight in front of them.

"I am afraid there is a good deal of work to do," pursued Mr Crotchett, desperately. "And the kitchen is not at all what I should like it to be. The man who built the house did not understand what is wanted in a kitchen—or, indeed, anywhere else. It ought, of course, to be at the top of the house"—here the two servants looked at him—"with a flat roof, where you could take the air, and space for a roof garden. The floor," said Charles, warming to his theme, "should be of red tiles; the walls, I think, tiled in white, with perhaps a band of

colour; and space for comfortable chairs. An electric fan in the roof, with a system of skylights, would be installed. Not that there would not be windows: windows arranged to command a view are essential. Nothing gives greater relief to the mind, wearied by mechanical toil, than the prospect of wide horizons. The old-fashioned kitchen-range——”

Arrested by the unmistakable hostility of Cook's expression, Mr Crotchett paused.

“Begging your pardon, sir,” said Cook, stiffly, “I haven't no fault to find with the range. It's——”

“It's nothing to do with you, sir, our wanting a change,” broke in Isabel, boldly. “If it was only you, sir, we would stay and glad to do it.”

“Nor I wouldn't like you to think as it was anyways connected with Master George or Miss Marjorie, for as I says to Isabel, if you're fond of the children, what's a little extra worry now and then? Neither here nor there, I says.”

Mr Crotchett began to perceive whither the conversation was tending, and his heart sank lower.

“I am sure,” he said firmly, “Miss Crotchett is a most excellent mistress.”

Another embarrassing silence.

“Well, sir,” said Cook, presently, “I shouldn't like there to be no misunderstanding. There's things about the 'ouse which ain't right, sir, if you'll excuse me saying it. Are we to understand as another lady is coming to the 'ouse, sir?”

“Miss Grey is certainly coming—as a holiday governess,” said Charles. “I hope she will make the children happier.”

“ I hope so, I’m sure, sir,” said Cook, dubiously. “ Not that Isabel nor me would raise any objections to the children’s good. I’m sure I’ve often said to Isabel as I pitied the poor dears coming in from school and sitting down all the evening to their books, work, work, work, till ever so late. But it ain’t that, sir. There’s a strange man about the ’ouse, sir.”

“ Where ? ” asked Charles.

“ He came this evening, sir. A foreign-looking man. He was a-singing outside the window. Miss Crotchett, she bought some flowers or something of that from him at the front door—that in the vase there, sir.” Cook pointed to the bunch of sesame, sniffing dubiously. “ There’s something not right about the smell of it, to my thinking,” she continued. “ It run all through the ’ouse, upstairs and all. The man come in, too, right in the front door, though Isabel swear she never opened it, and she saw him come in here, sir.”

“ He come in,” said Isabel, “ and he was dressed like in a theatre ; and when he come out the children come with him to the door. It was after that I hears Miss Crotchett scolding them, and then they run out.”

“ It’s my belief they run out after the man,” said Cook.

“ Miss Crotchett, she ran out after them,” said Isabel. “ We’re afraid to go to bed, sir,” she added.

“ On all accounts, sir, we should wish to leave to-night,” said Cook. “ Isabel, she’ve kindly offered to give me a bed at her house, which is

not far off. We could send for our boxes in the morning."

"Well," said Charles, after a pause of intense depression, "don't you think you are very selfish people? For all I know, the children are lost, and their aunt too; and you want to run away."

A bell rang loudly, and there fell a heavy knocking on the door. Cook and Isabel uttered a short cry.

"There they are!" cried Mr Crotchett. "Here, I'll go."

On the doorstep stood a messenger-boy, who handed a note to Mr Crotchett. Charles was so deeply preoccupied that he scarcely glanced at the messenger, though he was vaguely aware that the boy seemed very tall for his age.

"I will wait here for an answer," said the messenger.

Leaving the door open, Charles stood beneath the light in the hall. He perceived the envelope, which was marked "immediate," to be inscribed in the scrawling hand of his employer, Mr Screwby; and a sense of coming disaster fell upon him. He read the note twice. Then he stood where he was for nearly a minute.

Returning to the room with a very pale face: "You are quite right," said Charles to the two women. "You had better go to-night, since you wish it. I should have been obliged to give you notice, had you not forestalled me. I have been discharged from my employment."

For a moment Cook and Isabel stood irresolute.

Then, as Mr Crotchett turned away, they left the room. Isabel broke out sobbing in the passage.

Bad news is like a heavy blow over the heart ; it turns a man dizzy. Charles Crotchett, grasping his chin in his hand, stared unseeing into the shadows of the familiar room. He thought, with a pang, that it would soon be his room no more. The cheque he held in his fingers would barely cover the next month's expenses. Mary Grey would never be the children's holiday governess. He saw himself next day tramping the streets in search of work. Well he knew what that heart-breaking search was like. He had seen many a man call at the counting-house to ask for employment. It was indeed one of his duties to tell the poor wretch that there was no vacancy. He knew the drawn, wistful look, the frayed collar, the patched boots, carefully polished ; the shiny frock-coat, buttoned because there was no waistcoat beneath ; the dragging walk, the bowed shoulders, as the man went out. . . . Sometimes Charles had furtively handed to the man the price of Charles's own meagre dinner.

And what would happen to the children ? The thought was insupportable. He put it away : and then he remembered that they had not yet come home. And where was the singing policeman ?

By a natural association he then remembered that he had left the messenger waiting on the doorstep, and he hurried out.

"There is no answer," he said.

"Then," said the messenger-boy—and at the



sound of his clear, resonant voice Charles looked at him sharply—

“Then, we will go to find the children.”

“Are you the—the policeman?” said Mr Crotchett. “Yes, you are.”

“I *was*,” said the messenger. “Just as you were old Joe Screwby’s clerk. Things change so, don’t they?”

“We must make haste,” said the messenger, “for I have to be a cab-driver in a few minutes.” He was half-way down the steps as he spoke, and Crotchett, bare-headed as he was, followed him.

And indeed it was a few minutes later when the four-wheeler drew up at the door of Mr Screwby’s mansion; and a few minutes—for things, as the messenger said, changed so—after that, Cook and Isabel, each carrying one of those telescopic straw baskets bound with straps which are so useful on these occasions, left the deserted house of Crotchett, and descried a four-wheeler ambling along the lonely street.

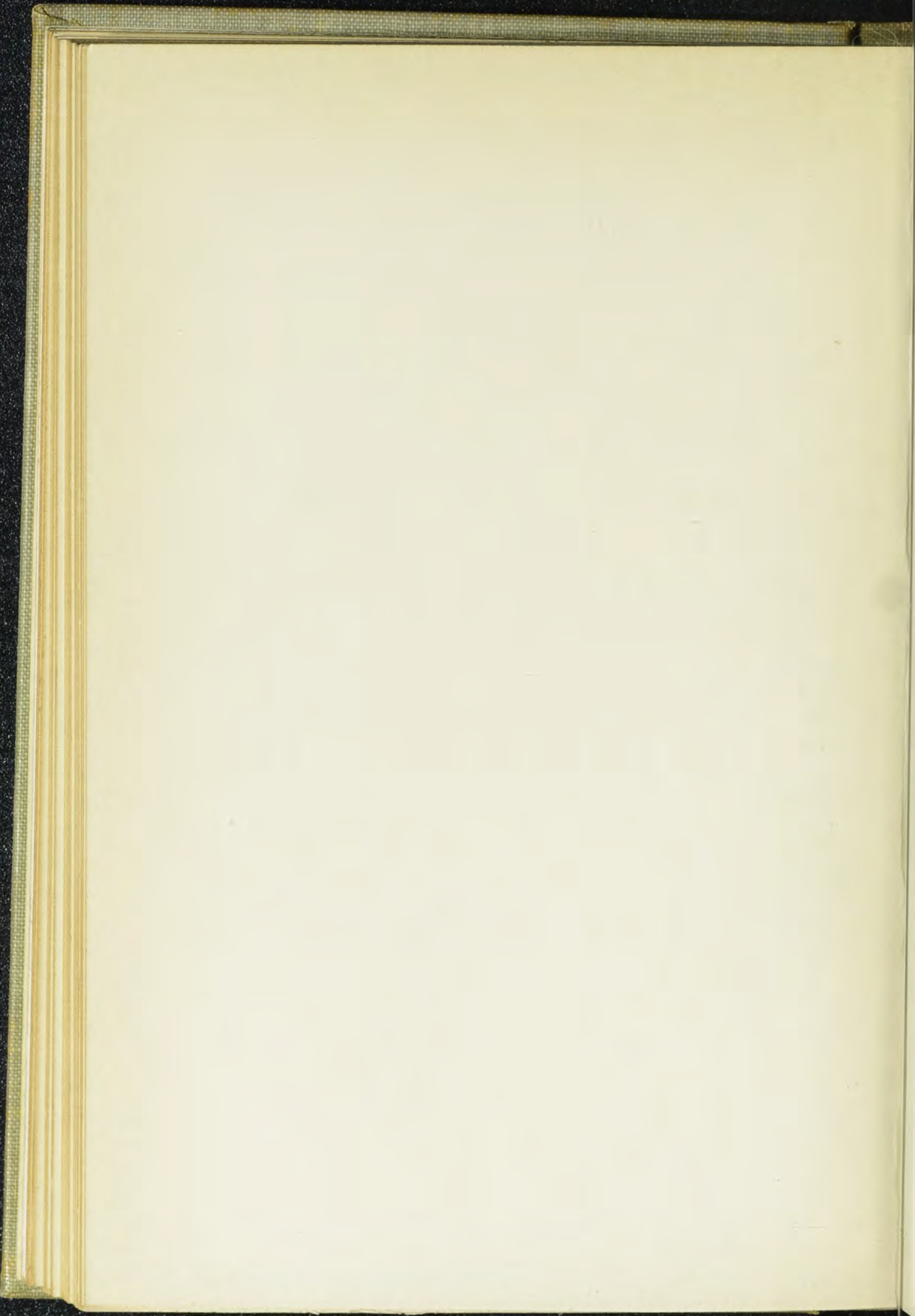
The driver pulled up alongside the two agitated women.

“Ladies,” said he politely, “I have just set down my last fare. I am going home, and if it’s on your way—jump in, and it will be a pleasure.”

“Shall us, Cook?” said Isabel.

“Shall us, Isabel?” said Cook.

The door of the cab swung open; they climbed in; the door slammed; and the vehicle started.



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## BOOK II

### I

#### THAT WHICH HAS BEEN

GEORGE and Marjorie lay sound asleep upon a bank of soft red sand, beneath a twisted canopy of the gnarled roots of the trees of a dim forest, which closed in a grassy glade. Beneath the thick foliage, the old, writhen boles were bearded with grey lichen ; so that its nearer depths were hued like dull silver merging into a coloured and a profound obscurity. The bank upon which lay the children was the side of a sharp slope falling to an unseen stream, the noise of whose waters rose upon the quiet air, and rising steeply, clothed in forest, on the further side. Beyond the V-shaped valley burned the fires of sunset, barred with dusky cloud ; and, graven dark upon that radiance, a cliff jutted from the hillside, crowned with the towers and gables of a castle which seemed to grow from out the rock.

There emerged from the forest, leaping lightly down the bank, the figure wearing the scarlet cap and feather and the brown tunic, which had entered the schoolroom in Maida Vale. The strange man stood for a moment contemplating the prone figures

of the children. Then he set a silver hunting-horn to his lips and sounded a call, very high and clear.

Marjorie sat up, bright awake in an instant; George, rubbing his eyes, struggled to his feet, looked about him, bewildered, and perceived the strange man.

"O, it's you," said George. "I say, where are we?"

"A thousand years ago," said the stranger.

"It looks old," said George, critically, "but it feels just the same."

"It's lovely," cried Marjorie, going close up to the stranger. "Is it in England?"

"It *is* England," said the stranger. "Nothing can alter That which Has been."

"Have I ever been here before?" asked Marjorie, gazing about her. "I feel as if I had. This place is like the forest King Arthur and his Knights used to ride in—'endthwart and overlong'—you know."

"They ride here still," said the stranger.

"And is Merlin the Wizard still here?" asked Marjorie.

"I am Merlin," said the stranger, with his quick smile.

The children gazed at him.

"I beg your pardon," said Marjorie, shyly, "but it said in the book that Merlin was a hundred winters old and he was put under a great stone by his spell and left there."

"Quite right," said the stranger. "Merlin was foolish and was punished. He was freed in due time, when he had learned his lesson. It made him

sorry for people who were making mistakes of their lives and anxious to help them. So he grew young again."

"And so," said Marjorie, comfortably, "you came to us."

"And what are we going to do now?" asked George.

"You'll have plenty to do in a moment," said Merlin. "Hark, there's someone calling!"

From the deep of the wood there sounded a thin high call. Merlin put his horn to his lips and wound it again.

A girl came running into the glade. Her long black locks fell about her face, her gown of green silk was torn and soiled, her legs, bare from knee to ankle, were scratched and bleeding. Panting, she cast a swift glance at the children, and turned to the quiet watching figure of Merlin.

"What is your haste?" said he.

"Sir," replied the girl, "I seek help for my father. He is taken and bound, our house is burned, and I am escaped. Forester, have you seen any that can help?"

"There is one who rests to-day at the Holy Well by the Hart's Leap," said Merlin. "But the place is far, the way is rough, and the night is coming."

"I can travel a horse-pace for ten leagues," said the girl, impatiently. "Show me the way, good man. If I find not help in the road, I must wend me to the King, though it take me a year."

Ere Merlin could reply there came a sound of

breaking branches, and a boy burst through the tangle, and sprang down the bank.

"Stop," he cried. "Mad wench, I tell you stop."

The girl faced about.

"Here is my brother," she cried. "He will take the Castle of Droon by himself, alone against thirty men-at-arms."

"I will try at all events," said the boy, a black-browed youth with a square chin. He glowered at the girl. "I tell you, you shall not go gadding through the wild wood to find one of these mountebank Knights-errant. What do we want with a Knight-errant, though you find one? But it is you that will be lost or eaten by a beast, Florian."

"No, no," struck in Merlin. "I will go with the Lady Florian, and with her shall go this lady, Marjorie. As for you, Sir Bors, here is one shall help you assault the castle. It will be a great deed of arms."

"And who are you?" cried the boy, furiously. "Stand back, and let be."

His sword flashed out of its scabbard; Merlin raised his hand, and the blade dropped from the boy's grasp upon the turf.

"I will meet you at the adventure, Sir Bors," said the Wizard.

He turned about and began to walk swiftly forward, the two girls, glancing curiously at each other, following a pace behind him.

## II

### THE HERMITAGE

MERLIN led the way across the brawling stream, and Marjorie, plunging bravely through the water, was wet to the waist. Had not Florian caught her she would have fallen. Marjorie was astonished at the strength of the slender brown creature, poised so serenely in the rush of the green water.

“Do you come from Camelot that your dress is fashioned so strangely?” asked Florian, as they climbed the hill beneath the trees.

“I come from London,” said Marjorie.

“That is the old city of the Romans, and very far,” said Florian. “Few go there now. The Court dwells at Winchester. I marvel how you came from thence.”

“So do I,” said Marjorie. “I cannot remember But Merlin brought me.”

“Have you then seen Merlin?”

Marjorie pointed to their guide.

“He said he was Merlin,” she whispered, and Florian’s eyes widened in amazement.

“I thought he could not be a forester,” said Florian, speaking low. “But Merlin—this is the best news ever I heard in my life days. Now we

shall be holpen indeed. He comes and goes as he listeth ; scarce any, save the King, hath spoken with him face to face in the memory of man. Marked you how he set my brother down ? ”

She fell into silence. Marjorie saw with admiration how easily Florian climbed the rough path, slippery with loose stones, barred by monstrous roots of trees, and twisting about steep rocks ; while Marjorie herself was striving her utmost, her heart beating like a hammer. And still upward flitted the scarlet cap with its jaunty feather of their guide. Presently they came out upon a bare hill-top, studded here and there with twisted and stunted thorn, and beheld in the twilight the solemn sea of forest stretching unbroken into the dark ; while at their feet the lone harebells bowed in the cool wind.

As they sped swiftly across the wold Florian told her story. She spoke with a strange, broad, dragging accent, and some of the words she used Marjorie did not understand ; yet she understood the story.

“ Have you a mother ? ” asked Florian, abruptly. “ I have none. It is great pity.”

“ I know,” said Marjorie. “ My mother is dead too.”

“ Then you and I are alike in this,” said Florian, gravely. “ And have you a father ? ”

“ The best that ever was,” said Marjorie.

“ I too,” said Florian. “ Sir Hue of the Homestead, he is named. They call him of the Homestead because he chose to dwell in a fair house in his farmlands rather than in a walled castle, and



to till his ground among borrel men rather than go out to rob his neighbours or to fight for this king or that in the wars. So it came to pass that his land is much coveted for its crops and gear ; and because he would sell none of it, Sir Marlot of Droon did fasten a quarrel upon my father. The estates of Sir Marlot march with the lands of my father, Sir Hue, and Sir Marlot is a covetous and wicked man. He holds his niece in thrall for her lands, of which he has the charge ; and that was the ground of his quarrel. Sir Marlot did accuse my father of seeking to take away the Lady Griselda and to marry her for the sake of her lands. I will well that my father should marry her," said Florian, " if that is his wish."

" You would like a step-mother, do you think ? " suggested Marjorie.

" That is to be seen," said Florian. " But it is all one. I am on the side of my father, I. Wit you well that if an hair of his head be harmed by Sir Marlot, I will see justice done to that foul Knight, though I stab him with these hands. To-day, while we slept after dinner, down comes Sir Marlot from his crag with thirty-five men-at-arms, trussed up Sir Hue with ropes ere he could get him to sword or harness, and set fire to the house, so that it went up in a great blaze. Whenas I fled away, I met my brother Bors coming in from the field, and he ran to arm himself. Then he followed me. So we came to Merlin."

Florian spoke with a kind of quiet fierceness that moved Marjorie to a sudden heat of generous

sympathy the like of which she had never felt before.

“Let me help you, Florian,” she cried. “I will do anything.”

“There will be bloody work before all’s done,” remarked Florian, glancing at Marjorie with her quick black eyes, that seemed always moving as though watching for danger. “And you have not so much as a bodkin for a weapon. But you have a true heart, and that is a great thing.”

“I wish I had a dagger like yours,” said Marjorie, looking at the poniard which hung sheathed at the leathern girdle of her friend.

“We will require his dagger of the next Knight-errant whom we meet,” said Florian. “But he would be more likely to take you away on his saddle-bow than to give you a weapon.”

“Surely not if he were a Knight of the Round Table,” said Marjorie.

“That is but a small fellowship,” replied Florian. “The more part of the wandering Knights seek their own profit, maugre all others.”

There was borne upon the wind rushing through the dry grass the sound of a bell of a singular sweet tone, rising and falling ; and a little after the ground began to fall away among thickets, whose white blossom, glimmering in the clear blue twilight, filled the air with blown fragrance. Here and there were sheep feeding, and at the approach of the travellers the lambs hurried to their mothers. The bell chimed louder, and a light shone through the trees.

As the two girls followed their guide, they perceived the light to flow from the round window of a small building, with a steep gable surmounted by a stone cross. The tolling of the bell ceased as they approached the low-arched doorway. Within, they beheld the white-robed figure of a tall man, standing beside a stone altar. He motioned them to enter ; and they sat down upon a massive oaken bench. Kneeling upon the step of the sanctuary was a man dressed in a close doublet and hose. In the dim and flickering light of the oil cresset slung from the roof by an iron chain, Marjorie could see nothing clearly. Shadows waved upon the wall, now hiding and now revealing painted angels and flying devils, a crowned king or the open jaws furnished with great teeth of some nameless monster. The man at the altar was reciting prayers in a deep-toned chant, but Marjorie could not understand what he said, nor had she seen anything in church at Maida Vale which enabled her to interpret his gestures and movements. She wondered if the kneeling figure was a knight. And she wondered why in this strange place she felt so little surprise, and as though it were natural that she should be there. Then, amid the waving shadows, in the sound of the deep ringing voice, Marjorie forgot herself completely. Within her mind she was looking intensely for something, she knew not what ; something that, could she only perceive a glimpse of it, would be the greatest thing in the world. . . .

Suddenly the voice ceased, and Marjorie returned to herself with a deep sigh ; and in the silence she

heard the sheep without cropping the greensward that ran to the very door of the chapel. Then they were outside in the starlight, and Merlin was speaking apart with the man who had been kneeling on the step of the sanctuary ; and the tall priest took the two girls by the hand, and talking cheerily, led them to a low wooden building standing in an ordered garden behind the chapel. High above, the hill was cleft as by a wedge, and in the opening there gleamed a single star.

“ Come into the guest-house,” said the priest, “ and there will we sup. I know not who you are, but my house is ever open. If you are in trouble or in danger, you are safe here ; and here you may abide. The more the guests, the better I am pleased.”

In the light of the candles burning in the guest-house Marjorie took note of her host. He was a young man, with a simple, open face, deeply browned, and his upright bearing and broad shoulders gave the impression of great strength. He wore a brown habit, open at the neck, and secured by a girdle reaching to the knee. His legs and feet were bare.

As though it were a matter of course, Florian helped him to set the meal on the table : a shoulder of mutton, a huge loaf of bread, a jar of honey, wooden platters, sharp knives with handles of stags' antlers, and horn drinking cups.

“ Please may I help ? ” said Marjorie.

“ Right so,” said the priest. “ Fill me these cups from the Holy Well.” And he pointed from

the door to a ring of hewn stones which rose upon the grass.

The rough stones enclosed a glimmering pool, like the setting to a dark jewel, shot with the reflection of a star. Marjorie dipped a cup into the cold water, cold and pure as the rain upon the hills; and went to and fro, setting the full cups upon the board.

Then in came the man who had knelt in the chapel, and looked keenly upon the two girls. His eyes were narrow and grey, gleaming from under straight brows. Short, broad, deep-chested, his legs somewhat bowed as by much riding, he wore the aspect of a man whose business in life was to put through a piece of work that came his way, without haste but very thoroughly. Marjorie observed that the bridge of his nose was dented, as though it had been broken.

"Maidens," said he briskly, "have you eaten? Tarry not, for there is work to be done, and you must show me the way to the place."

With that he cut a huge slice from the mutton, and another from the loaf, and set to eating without another word.

"Mass and meat will carry a man to heaven," observed the priest cheerfully.

He served the two girls and filled his own platter, and all ate hungrily. But the Knight with the broken nose ate twice as much. When he had done he wiped his fingers on a piece of bread and went out. In the meantime, Merlin was no more to be seen.

Presently there came a tramp of horses' feet and a holloaing. Florian, catching Marjorie by the hand, ran out. The Knight was mounted on a great horse, which Marjorie thought looked like a cart-horse, and was leading a second horse by the bridle. Upon the second horse was strapped a bundle.

"Which of you can ride?" asked the Knight. "Up with you, and sit in front of the armour."

The priest lifted Florian into the saddle, which she bestrode like a boy, and handed her a long and heavy spear. She dropped the butt into a bucket attached to the stirrup, and was ready. The priest then lifted Marjorie upon the croup of the horse upon which the Knight was mounted.

"Set your hands in my belt," said he.

The next moment they were riding into the dark.

### III

#### THE LAD OF THE FOREST

TURN we to the two boys, left together when Merlin departed with the two girls. Bors, the brother of Florian, stared after them as if bewitched: as perhaps he was. Then he picked up his sword from the turf, sheathed it, and turned to George, who was watching him with great interest.

"Who is yon forester?" demanded Bors, bending his black brows upon George.

"I should think," said George, with a grin, "that he was a conjurer."

"I know not what that may be," returned Bors. "I think he is a witch. He gave me a pain in my arm. It's gone now," he added, feeling that member. "He's taken away your sister as well as mine," went on the boy, grumbling. "Are you not going to pursue him?"

"Well, what about you?" retorted George.

"Florian must do as she will. She is a fighting wench. She can pull down a wild boar and brittle him," said Bors.

"O well," said George, easily, "the chap in the red cap is all right. We know him at home. He knows what he's about."

The other eyed him dubiously.

"You have a stranger manner of speech," said he, "but you seem indifferent honest. Were it not for the plight I am in, I would challenge you to a wrestling match."

"I'm not afraid," returned George. Education in the manly art of wrestling was not part of the course at George's school, but he was accustomed to rough play.

"Have at it, then," returned Bors. He unbuckled his sword and hunting-knife, and took off his leathern doublet, appearing in a thin woollen vest. George divested himself of his jacket, waistcoat and collar. His adversary, without more words, advanced upon him warily. The next moment George was crushed in a grip that nearly broke his ribs, and was flung on his back with a force that knocked the breath out of him. He sat up and laughed.

"How did you do that?" he asked, panting.

"I'll teach you anon," said Bors, regarding the other with a grim favour. "You are soft all over."

"We haven't much time for exercise at school," explained George. "And the drill is rotten."

"Have you not learned to manage a horse, to tilt at the ring, to fence with sword and shield?"

"No such luck," said George.

"It must be a strange school," said Bors. "Is it a religious house?"

"Not in particular," George replied.



"Well," said Bors, "you had best follow your friend the witch and the two maids, for assuredly if you stay in the forest you will be eaten up alive. You should stay with the maidens, for you are soft as they."

He spoke not unkindly, but the insult was more than George could bear.

"I'll show you if I'm soft or not," he said, and advanced upon the forest lad with clenched fists.

But Bors leaped backwards like a deer.

"Let be, foolish boy," he said. "I would be loath to slay you, for you have a good spirit. If you would prove your hardihood, come with me upon my errand."

"What errand?" asked George, sulkily.

"My father, Sir Hue, was taken to-day as he slept by that foul thief, Sir Marlot of Droon," said Bors. "I was coming home from the upland, where I stayed to beat a churl because of his great laziness, when my sister Florian came running, and I beheld the house and barns in a light-low, and men-at-arms to the number of hundreds all about. Naked as I was, I ran in among them and they gave way before me, and I ran into the burning and gat my sword from the hall, when a blazing rafter fell and I had ado to escape. So they carried my father, bound with ropes, to the Castle of Droon. I will fetch him out again, though I die," cried Bors, with a very swelling manner.

"But you can't take a castle by yourself, you

know," said the practical George. "I'll come with you, of course, for the lark of it, but it won't be any use."

"Ah," returned Bors, "if your father were in captivity, would you fold your hands and do nothing?"

"Of course I wouldn't," said George.

"I know not who your father may be, and you bear no badge on your jerkin," went on Bors. "But an if he hath never fallen into ill-hap at the hands of wrong-doers, he must be a marvellous great clerk."

"Well, what if he is?" retorted George, who thought the other implied a taunt. "He can't help going to the City every day, can he? That's as bad as being in prison. He says so himself. When I'm grown up, I shall earn money and get him out of it," added George, to whom the idea had just occurred.

"We don't wait so long in the Forest," said Bors, shortly. "Come, let us go." And he began to walk forward.

"Yes, but look here," said George, catching him up, "what are you going to do? You must have some plan, you know."

The sturdy honest face of Bors wore a pathetic look of bewilderment.

"How can I make a plan when I know not what will happen?" said he, stopping short.

"Well, the first thing that will happen is that the warders or whoever they are will stop you going into the castle, and perhaps cut your head off—

and mine too," observed George. "What's the use of that?"

"You that are the son of a great clerk, devise me a way," said Bors.

"Couldn't we disguise ourselves?" suggested George, hopefully.

"You are a stranger, and need it not—your clothing is strange, your speech foreign," replied Bors. "You could ask a night's lodging and be freely entertained. But there is not a man-at-arms nor a villein that knows not me."

George meditated.

"I know," he said eagerly. "Let us change clothes, and I'll do all the talking. I'll say you are ill, or something."

"It might serve," said Bors, doubtfully. "But I like not the fashion of your clothing."

"Well, we can change again afterwards," said George, who, comparing his ready-made suit with the leathern jacket and hose of Bors, did not himself any longer like the fashion of his clothing.

Bors assented with a nod.

"Have you thought well," he asked, pausing with one leg in George's breeches, "that you are running into some deal of peril?"

"I don't mind," said George.

"It seems you will to do more for my father than for your own," remarked Bors; and George was conscious of a stab of remorse.

"Keep your shoon," said Bors. "I cannot be tortured with them. Carry my sword in your

hand and be ready to give it to me in case of need."

George would have given all he possessed in the world for the sword, but he was obliged to agree. They set off through the darkening forest.

#### IV

### AUNT ELIZA'S ADVENTURE

WHEN Miss Eliza Crotchett, having concluded her argument concerning the new governess with her brother, went upstairs to find the two children, they were in their bedrooms undressing, eager to go to bed and to fall asleep in order that in some mysterious way the stranger might then visit them as he had promised. Aunt Eliza, whose temper was somewhat ruffled, chose to regard their action as disobedience and ordered them to go downstairs and to resume their tasks. Both George and Marjorie received their instructions in silence; resumed the garments they had taken off; and left the house. When Aunt Eliza discovered their absence she was both terrified on their account and alarmed upon her own. She believed firmly that it was dangerous to go out at night in London, or indeed, anywhere else; and her conscience, which was all the more active because it worked in narrow limits, told her that she had been unduly severe. So she hastily donned hat and cloak, took an umbrella, and went out to find the children. Presently she met a policeman.

“Constable,” said the agitated Miss Crotchett,

“ have you seen two children—a boy and a girl—running away ? ”

“ Are you sure,” asked the policeman politely, “ that they were running away ? The expression implies a deliberate intention not to return home—a serious matter.”

“ I—I hope it was not that,” returned Miss Crotchett, rather confused. “ They ran out of the house in disobedience to my orders.”

“ And what, may I ask, were those orders ? ” The policeman began slowly to pace up the street, and Miss Crotchett was obliged to keep beside him.

“ I am sure, constable, I don't know why you should ask such a question,” she said stiffly.

“ Simply in order, as we say, to make the case complete,” returned the policeman, mildly. “ You must trust a policeman all in all or not at all,” he added.

“ Certainly,” said Miss Crotchett, her voice trembling, “ anything you want to know, constable, if you will help me to find the dear children. I—I am most distressed. I only told them to go on with their lessons—and they ran out of the house.”

“ Ah,” said the policeman gravely. “ A material point. What was their objection to going on with their lessons ? Had they any special reason ? ”

“ It was the first day of the holidays,” returned Aunt Eliza, recovering her composure. “ But I do beg of you, constable, if you have seen them——”

“ I assure you we are wasting no time,” interrupted the policeman, continuing to pace steadily forward. “ The case becomes clearer every moment.

Do you think, now, that you were justified in making children work upon"—he raised an impressive finger—"the—first—day—of—the—holidays?"

"Dear me," cried Miss Crotchett, indignantly, "you are a very impertinent officer!"

"I beg your pardon," said the placid policeman. "The question is so far from being impertinent—a word, which, as you are aware, means failing to bear a direct relation to the subject in hand—that upon its answer depends my course of action. I may say at once," he added courteously, "in order to relieve your anxiety, which is natural and right, that I know where the children are."

"O, thank you," cried Miss Crotchett. "If you will only take me to them, I will answer any questions you like. No doubt you have a good reason for asking them. I admit at once that I was perhaps a little hasty with the children—though I was only anxious for their good."

"There you strike the root of the problem," said the policeman. "What is for the good of children? It is the greatest question in the world. Who can answer it? But one thing is certain: your idea is mistaken. Or why did they leave you? You will understand," he continued, "that with every step we are drawing nearer to them, and that my observations are solely intended to make perfectly clear the case which you have entrusted to me, and which is now approaching completion."

Miss Crotchett, who was becoming rather tired, as though she had walked a long way, in spite of her conviction that she had left the house but a few minutes since, made no reply. She was conscious, moreover, that she was in a part of London new to her. The streets had unaccountably given place to unlighted roads, with here and there the lighted window of a house shining among dark shapes of trees.

"Have we far to go?" asked Aunt Eliza. "Because, if so, I almost think I must afford a cab—indeed, I fear it will be necessary for the return journey."

"The longest journeys," observed the policeman, "are not taken in cabs. But we are close to our destination."

"This must be Epping Forest, surely," said Miss Crotchett, gazing about her. "I had no idea it was so near to Maida Vale."

The dim road stretched a little way in front of them and disappeared in the black shadow of a forest, through which its course was marked by the rift in the mass of trees. A little beyond, a building of high towers and gables was blotted upon a sky of stars, and pierced here and there with orange shapes of light.

"Go straight forward," said the voice of the policeman.

"What do you *mean*?" said Aunt Eliza, angrily.

There was no answer. Turning her head she could see no one. She was alone in a vast cool fragrant silence.



"Disgraceful!" said Aunt Eliza, stamping her foot. "I don't believe the man was a policeman at all. His behaviour was *most* unusual. But perhaps," she reflected, with a gleam of hope, and gazing at the building that loomed upon the stars, "he has gone forward to the police-station—if, indeed, that curious place *is* a police-station. What with these new County Councils building, one never can tell. Or again," speculated Miss Crotchett, "it may be an hotel. The policeman seemed very intelligent for a man of his class, and he may have thought it wise to direct the children to an hotel."

She began to walk forward, feeling for the road with her umbrella, for the way was painfully uneven. Presently she drew clear of the trees and began to climb a steep path hewn out of the rock. Then, as the walls towered above her, she came to a wooden bridge, and crossing it, she stood before a wide archway, in the side of which was a doorway, through which a light burning in the room shed a feeble radiance.

The next moment a great horn lantern was flashed in her eyes.

"Who are you, dame?" said a rough voice, speaking with so uncouth an accent that Miss Crotchett rather guessed than understood the meaning of the words.

"I was directed here by a constable, who told me that my nephew and niece were here," she replied, with dignity.

"They may be, for aught I know," replied the

man with the lantern. "You had better speak with my lord."

He turned about and led the way beneath the deep vaulted archway to an open courtyard. With a shock of horror Miss Crotchett noticed that his legs were bare from mid-thigh to ankle. At the same moment her nose was assailed by a powerful odour, compounded of stables, the steam of cooking meat and vegetables, and decaying refuse, which turned her giddy. A great clatter and noise of voices flowed from the many open windows looking on the courtyard, across which dim figures of men and women were confusedly passing and repassing; there were horses tethered beside the walls, munching their provender, stamping upon the stones, whinnying and squealing.

Through this horrible tumult the terrified old lady picked her way, holding her skirts high, following the man with the lantern to a second archway, where he left her without a word, good or bad.

Pausing on the threshold, Miss Crotchett perceived within a great chamber, smokily illumined by torches flaming on the walls, the floor strewn with fragrant green rushes. Round the walls stood massive trestle tables. Opposite to the archway a fire of logs blazed in a great chimney, about which moved dark figures, apparently engaged in cooking.

Faced directly with the incomprehensible, Miss Crotchett rose bravely to action. Wading into the rushes she perceived at the upper end of the hall a

long table raised on a low platform, and in the centre of the table, was seated in a high-backed chair a grey-bearded man, reading in a great book. As Aunt Eliza advanced up the hall he raised his head; and she noted that he wore a little cap of a dark red colour, and that he was dressed in a loose gown of some woollen stuff. The old gentleman rose as she drew near, passed behind the table and stepped down from the dais to meet her.

"Dame," said he, "in what can I serve you?" His glance dwelt upon her black mantle, ornamented with beads, her large, shapeless, nodding hat, her umbrella. "Have you lost your way in the forest? Many travellers lose their way. This is the Castle of Droon," he said courteously.

Again Miss Crotchett had the curious sensation of understanding the meaning of the words without understanding the words themselves.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I had no idea this was a private residence. I—I was misdirected. I was looking for my nephew and niece."

"Ha," said the Knight. "Are you sib, then, to Sir Hue of the Homestead?"

"Certainly not," replied Aunt Eliza. "My father was a clergyman."

"So," said Sir Marlot, gently. "Gentle or simple, hedge-priest, knight or friar, all are welcome to such cheer as we have. Rest you, dame, eat your fill, and after the wenches shall find you a lodging."

Bowing, he turned away, went back to his chair, and once more bent his grey head over his book.

Miss Crotchett, whose aged limbs were giving way under her, took the practical course, seated herself upon one of the benches that were set between the trestle-tables and the walls, leaned back against the green woollen fabric with which they were draped, and closed her weary eyes.

V

TAKING A SITUATION

THE sound of a familiar voice awoke Miss Crotchett with a start.

“Saucy!” it exclaimed; and there followed the noise occasioned by an open hand sharply descending upon the human cheek, and an explosion of ribald laughter. Scrambling to her feet, Miss Crotchett beheld an agitated group of figures beside the entrance archway, among which she recognised the face of Cook, fiery red beneath a crooked bonnet, and the pretty, laughing countenance of Isabel. Miss Crotchett’s faculty of amazement was exhausted; she could no longer feel surprise at anything; but the sight of her two servants was like the view of a sail to a shipwrecked mariner; and she screamed to them at the top of her voice, and waved her umbrella.

In the momentary silence which ensued, there rose a great voice from the high table.

“If these wenches belong to the dame,” cried Sir Marlot, “let her order them to help with the serving, and let them eat thereafter.”

And with that the old Knight, passing behind a curtain at the back of the dais, quitted the hall.

"Do you hear, Cook and Isabel," screamed Miss Crotchett. "Come here."

The people about them fell back and slunk away, and the two servants stumbled across the rushes to their former mistress.

"Now set to work like good girls," said Miss Crotchett. "Don't ask me any questions—I can't answer them. I don't know where we are or what will become of us. We must just behave like brave Englishwomen."

"Begging your pardon, miss," said Cook, "I'm not afraid of any of 'em. But cook at an open fire I never have and never will. And the place like a pigsty and all."

"You can help with the basting," returned Miss Crotchett, desperately, glancing towards the great fire, where what seemed to be the carcass of a whole animal, black against the glow, was spinning gruesomely on a spit.

"I wish I'd never left the 'ouse, that I do," said Cook. But she turned away to join the busy group beside the fire.

"Serves us right, I say," Isabel remarked, confidentially. "And so I told Cook, when that there cab drove away and left us. We'd never ought to have given notice, I says. It's a lesson to us, I says, as long as we live."

"It was very foolish of you both," said Miss Crotchett. "But we all make mistakes at times. Now run along, there's a good girl, and show these—these creatures—how to lay a table."

"Yes, miss," said Isabel, and mingled with the

bustling, noisy company of serving men and maids who were setting wooden platters along the tables.

To Miss Crotchett's terror there arose a sudden hubbub about the fire. Apparently Cook was enforcing her own methods, for she was gesticulating with a long iron ladle, and because her mouth was wide open it was evident that she was shouting at the other servants, though her voice was merged in the din. A huge rustic woman, a head taller than Cook, seized that lady by the shoulders and shook her till her bonnet fell off. Cook's face was painted with an extreme amazement, swiftly changing to dismay, and finally dissolving into tears.

"Serve her right, the silly woman," said Miss Crotchett. "She can't expect to go on as if she were in her own kitchen. How often have I wanted to shake her—and now it's been done."

The sound of a horn, emitting a loud, deep and prolonged note, so startled the old lady that she jumped where she stood, and cried out. There was a sudden silence.

## VI

### THE PARTY IN THE CASTLE

THE curtain hanging in front of the archway opening behind the dais, in the angle of the wall, was flung back, and there entered a man wearing a black robe and carrying a wand, and followed by a company. To Miss Crotchett's amazement and relief, the dark and handsome lady who walked in first obviously belonged to Miss Crotchett's class and time. Her hair was arranged in the mode of the day; and she was dressed in a fashion which Miss Crotchett's unerring perception recognised to be the last and the most expensive. But next to her came a lady attired in a white and shining gown, set with jewels, and of a mode which Miss Crotchett vaguely knew to be what she called antique. Her fair hair, moreover, was wrought into two long plaits, falling to the level of her knees; and, most strangely, she wore fine steel chains fettered to her wrists, which, of a length to leave her freedom of movement, were secured to the belt of another lady, who seemed to be her attendant.

She was followed by a lean, stooping old man with a straggly grey beard, most unmistakably clad in a frock-coat, buttoned across his chest, and



grey trousers. Then came the old Knight, Sir Marlot, wearing a white tunic, brightly embroidered and reaching to his knees, where it met the furred tops of long boots of soft leather.

Sir Marlot seated himself in his great chair, placing the lady who had first entered on his right hand. Beside her sat the chained lady, holding her head high and gazing straight down the hall, and next to her was her lady-in-waiting. The old gentleman in the frock-coat sat on Sir Marlot's left hand.

The man bearing the wand came down the hall and spoke to Miss Crotchett, who understood that she was invited to sit at the high table. There she found herself next to the old man in the frock-coat.

"Good evening, ma'am," said he, sourly. "May I ask——"

He broke off with a start, for Sir Marlot clapped his hands loudly, and immediately the servants began to hurry to and fro, bearing great dishes of smoking viands, which they ranged upon the high table. Among that motley array of servitors, Isabel, in her neat black dress, was conspicuous. She set a boar's head, stuck with green herbs, opposite to her mistress.

"Try a little of this, miss," said Isabel, kindly. "I know as you're partial to a nice bit of pork."

"I see you've taken the precaution to bring your own maid," remarked the old gentleman.

"I always think it makes me so much more comfortable in a strange house," replied Miss Crotchett, determined to preserve appearances to the last.

“Strange! . . .” repeated the old gentleman, in a tone so charged with meaning that Miss Crotchett felt a new access of terror, and was silent. She longed to ask questions of her neighbour, but something prevented her from speaking. Her habit of constantly pretending that the inconvenient did not exist was strong in her. She had avoided so many difficulties in her life by steadily refusing to recognise their existence, that in this pass she held desperately to her old expedient.

By this time the tables ranged along the walls were lined with people eating and drinking. In the uncertain glow and flame of the torches and the shadow, forms and faces were indistinct, save where the light struck here and there upon a bronzed countenance, bold of feature, alert of eye, or illumined a patch of blue or scarlet attire, or flashed upon steel. The upper end of the long chamber was bathed in the white hazy light of wax candles set in silver sconces.

“Is the wine good, Sir Jonas?” Sir Marlot addressed the old gentleman on his left.

“A sound wine, sir—a sound wine,” replied Mr Screwby, fingering his silver goblet. “I have some very like it—bought it of my old friend Boldero, who was badly hit in the Costa Rica affair. It stood me in fifty shillings.”

“A high ransom,” remarked Sir Marlot. “Onetwelfth the sum should have sufficed. But all in these days is done for money. Everything is worth what it will fetch in hard coin.”

“And quite right, too, I say,” rejoined Mr Screwby,

somewhat warmed by his potations. "I have no patience with these people who go about prating of sentiment. Sentiment! There's no sentiment in business. Why, only this evening——" he paused, stared about him with a bewildered expression, and drank more wine.

Sir Marlot, after courteously waiting to enable his guest to finish his sentence, continued:

"You speak truth, Sir Jonas. There is justice, and there is the contrary, which is not justice, nor is there aught between. The rest is vain words, whereto the wise man listens not."

"Quite right," said Mr Screwby. "And what I always say."

"And you, Dame Mary, what do you say?" Sir Marlot turned to the lady on his right hand, whose handsome face wore a look of lively interest.

"I think that you are a wicked old man," she replied, sweetly.

"Many have called me so," said Sir Marlot, with composure. "Doubtless, you have hearkened to the tale my daughter hath told you."

"Sir, I have said no word," struck in the lady whose wrists were bound with the long glittering chains, fiercely.

Here Miss Crotchett, comprehending that some painful family difference was in question, leaned forward, like a tactful hostess, to signal with a glance to the lady seated beside Sir Marlot, that it was the moment to retire. But Mary Grey, smiling, shook her head. It occurred to Miss Crotchett,

who drew a little comfort from the thought, that this young lady seemed singularly at ease amid her surroundings.

"Would you be so good as to ask the gentleman whether anything has been heard of my little niece and nephew?" said Miss Crotchett to Mr Screwby.

"What, ma'am," returned old Jonas, shifting his heavy-lidded glance upon her, "have you lost a niece? I lost mine this—this evening, and found her here before me. Take my advice, ma'am, take my advice. If you have lost a niece, let her go, and be thankful—and if a nephew too, so much the better." And he turned his shoulder upon Miss Crotchett, staring angrily across Sir Marlot at Miss Grey.

"Sir," he continued, addressing Sir Marlot, "this lady complains that she has lost her niece—I tell her she should be grateful for that mercy. Children grow up to be a curse to their elders. Why, sir, only this—this evening"—he baulked again at the word—"my niece there, sitting beside you, as calm as you please, ran away from me. If it hadn't been for your hospitality, I—I don't know what would have happened."

"You were better advised to have put her in chains," said Sir Marlot, practically.

"As you have chained your daughter," said Mary Grey, laying her hand on the shackled wrist beside her. "Fie, Sir Marlot. But she shall break her fetters. They shall be struck from off her, Sir Marlot."

"You say well," returned the old Knight. "She has but to obey me, her rightful lord, and I myself shall release her gladly."

"That is what you all say," replied Miss Grey. "Do what we tell you, think what we wish you to think, say what it pleases us you should say, and then, for the rest—do as you like. It is a knightly offer."

"You hear her?" cried Mr Screwby. "All this, and for what? Because I objected when she wanted to leave my house—where she had everything a girl could desire, and more—and——"

"And what, Mr Screwby?" said another voice.

There stood Charles Crotchett, clad in his old frock-coat, shabby, his greying hair dishevelled. But his lined face was changed. It wore an abstracted, eager look, as though he pursued a vision. His gaze lighted upon Mary Grey for an instant, and met her answering smile; then he confronted Mr Screwby, who was regarding him with mingled rage and amazement.

"What were you about to observe when I—rudely I fear—interrupted you?" said Mr Crotchett, politely.

Old Screwby raised a trembling finger and pointed at him.

"There's the man," he said, in his deep, grating tones, so loud that the people in the body of the hall ceased their talk and looked all the one way. "That's the fellow. Look at him. My niece, a lady born and bred, was going to him, if you please! Ran out of my house to go to him. And he dares

to come here after her. How did you come here, sir?" demanded Mr Screwby, with the utmost bitterness.

"By the same way as you came, I suppose," replied Mr Crotchett, placidly. "Excuse me." He turned to Sir Marlot, whose crafty visage expressed a profound attention. "Sir," continued Charles, "I came hither unawares, seeking for two children of mine. I beg your indulgence."

"The Castle of Droon is a refuge for the lost tonight," said Sir Marlot. "You are welcome to our company. Sit down at our board, fair sir, eat and drink."

"I will not remain here to be insulted," cried Mr Screwby, rising suddenly. "If that fellow stays, I go."

"Nor will I stay in the same room to hear my brother miscalled," said Miss Crotchett, with so sudden and shrill a vehemence that Mr Screwby started violently.

"I stay by my friends," said Mary Grey, setting an arm about the waist of the chained lady.

"You shall do yourself an ill service," said the Lady Griselda, clinging to Miss Grey. "This is an evil house."

They were all on their feet on the dais, Charles Crotchett facing the rest, with the same composed yet eager and expectant countenance.

"Nay, then," said Sir Marlot, smoothly dominating. "I shall yet make you all of accord. Old man," he turned to Mr Screwby, "what is your wrong?"

So commanding were his tones that Mr Screwby was obviously checked.

"You can judge for yourself," he said sulkily. "Here is my niece, who came running into your house to-night—if it was to-night"—with his former air of confusion. "I don't know what she told you. It's of no consequence. She quitted my house against my orders to go to this—this gentleman, in a menial capacity. He is a discharged servant of mine—that's what he is."

"I beg your pardon," said Miss Grey. "I went to find the children."

"And pray," broke in Miss Crotchett, "if I may be allowed to speak—what business, madam, was it of yours?"

"I am sorry we have not been introduced," replied Miss Grey. "I am the new governess."

"Why don't you say you want to marry the man and have done with it?" snarled old Jonas.

"All in good time," said Mary Grey, calmly.

"O, Charles!" exclaimed Miss Crotchett.

"I knew it!" cried Mr Screwby, furiously.

"How say you, sir?" Sir Marlot turned to Mr Crotchett, who clutched his hair with his familiar gesture.

"It's too good to be true," said Charles.

"Hear now!" Mary Grey spoke sudden and clear, so that her voice filled the long chamber. "Hear ye all! I will speak now before you all, though I speak never again." She raised her hand and pointed to old Jonas, who was staring at her with dropped jaw. "That old man, my uncle,

took me in and showed me kindness when I was fatherless and motherless, and clothed me richly and fed me sumptuously, and kept me in idleness. He had as servant this man whom he has reviled, toiling daily for him faithfully, shut up in an ill room like a prison, receiving meagre wages. This poor man had a call in his heart, calling him ever to escape to better things; yet for the sake of his children and his household he shut his ears. But so it befell that upon a day he spoke with me, knowing nothing of who I was, save that I was his friend; and I too heard the call. Then I said I would go to help him in his need, if it might be that we could find the way of escape together. For I have a little fortune of my own, and he has none. Then was this old man here, my uncle, enraged out of measure. He would fetter me, even as the Lady Griselda is shamefully chained in the sight of you all. Varlets, damosels and all ye who hear me, shall the rich and arrogant men chain you in servitude for ever? Shall your goods be taken, your labour forced, your lives wasted—for ever?"

As her voice ceased, there arose from the men and maidens crowded together in the hall a deep and menacing murmur like the rising of the sea. Sir Marlot, bending forward, struck the board with his fist so that the silver rang again, and shouted in a great voice.

"Here is treason," he cried. "I will make an end. I will make a speedy end." He clapped his



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hands and cried an order. There came a clash of steel on steel, the curtain hanging before the arched doorway in the end wall was flung back, and there entered men-at-arms, with a flash of swords, and in their midst a tall figure, his hands bound behind his back.

## VII

### SIR MARLOT SPEAKS HIS MIND

“STAND you yonder, Sir Hue of the Homestead.” Sir Marlot pointed with his long arm, from which the loose sleeve fell back, revealing the dark, corded sinews. “You shall answer before this fair company for your foul deeds, which I shall rehearse. You would marry the Lady Griselda for her goodly rents; and so you have cast a spell upon her by evil arts, so that she is made to break the commandment of me, her father and her rightful lord. She is ordained to be given in marriage to a right Knight of great worship and broad lands, at my will. Wit you well you never shall have her in all your life days.”

Sir Hue of the Homestead stood very still, gazing at the old Knight. He was a fair man, burned dark by the sun; there was blood on his face and blood clotted his long locks.

“Sir Marlot,” said he, “you are a thief and a murderer. You have misused this lady; you have burned my house, ravished my lands, and driven forth my children. Yea, you are an horrible coward; for you dare not meet me in a fair field.”

There came a sudden commotion in the hall as the figure of a boy burst from the crowd, crying aloud, and waving a long sword. He was clad in a leathern tunic and grey stockings, and his bare knees showed white as he stumbled among the rushes.

“To the rescue!” he shouted. “To the rescue!”

Miss Crotchett uttered a shrill scream.

“George!” shouted his father, “put that sword down, instantly. Instantly.”

At the same moment the boy tripped and sprawled his length upon the rushes, the sword flying out of his hand; while another lad, dressed in a homespun Norfolk jacket, his legs bare, sprang past him and snatched at the blade.

Sir Hue of the Homestead cried a sharp command, and the lad checked in his rush, his hand grasping the sword, upraised, his foot on the step of the dais, facing Sir Marlot, who stood like a rock, a thin smile wrinkling his face.

“For shame,” said Sir Hue. “Would you strike a naked man? Put up your sword.”

The boy flung it down. “The fool,” he cried, glaring at George, who stood panting and scared beside his father. “The fool! He would not give me the sword—he promised. He would not give it to me, or I would have spitted yon old traitor like a fowl or ever a word said.”

“The fool hath saved thee from a foul deed, Bors,” said Sir Hue. “Stand you beside me and we will abide what shall befall. Where is Florian?”

“She ran away,” said Bors, sulkily.

“And where is Marjorie?” Mr Crotchett asked his son.

“She ran away with the other girl,” said George. “This chap’s sister. I——”

“Ye did ill to let her go,” said Sir Hue, sternly. “If any harm befall them, both of you shall answer for it.”

“Just what I said,” grumbled George. “I *said* it wasn’t any good trying to take a castle by yourself. And what good could those girls possibly do, running off like that?”

“Here are two more of the lost come home,” Sir Marlot’s heavy voice broke in. “Truly, I must take heed lest the two damosels pull down my castle maugre my head.” He turned to Mr Screwby, who wore an expression of alarm. “Sir,” said he, “what shall be done with this Knight and my daughter? Am I not right to defend my own?”

“Eh?” said old Jonas. “O, quite right, sir, quite right. But haven’t you done enough? I don’t believe in violence myself. Let the man go, and wait till the girl comes to her senses. She’ll come round, give her time.”

“Old man,” cried the Lady Griselda, “evil in mind and of besotted body, what make you here with your crooked counsels? Wit you well the ways of London whence you come, that foul nest of huts where the serfs huddle in fear of the long ships of the heathen that sail up the river—wit you well these are not the ways of the wild wood. Ye have no mastery here. It were better to die than to live shamed and beggared and broken. As for me, I

give ye all to wit, if aught of harm befall this noble Knight, Sir Hue, I will rive myself through this body with a sword."

"Ha," said Sir Marlot. "You speak great words, but they are but air. Sir Hue, I would deal mercifully with you. Make oath that you will renounce the damosel, the Lady Griselda, in all your life days, and you are free to go where you will for me."

"Sir," said the Knight, "it is your pleasure to mock me. Wit you well I make no such treachery, for aught that you can do."

"Then," said Sir Marlot, composedly, "I shall cut off your head."

"Come, come, sir," broke in old Jonas, "you can't do that—you can't do that. A joke's a joke, and I can enjoy a joke as well as any man, but you are going too far, sir. In the presence of ladies, it's bad taste, I take leave to say. Why, one would think you meant to murder the man."

"You are all in a plot against me." Sir Marlot glared like a wolf upon his guests. "Think you I was ignorant that you all came hither to-night in disguise for to aid this Knight whom I hold at my will? Nay, I knew your design. Yon two boys were to stab me while you held me in talk. Then would you have dwelt in my castle, you and your varlets, and made merry with my goods. Doubt not, you shall answer it in good time."

"You lie," cried young Bors. "The intent was mine, and mine only. It was this fool here marred——" He was interrupted by Mr Screwby.

"Are you mad, sir?" shouted old Jonas. "I

never saw the confounded boys before. How dare you associate me with those young ruffians ? ”

“ It’s perfectly true,” interposed Mr Crotchett. “ I’m responsible for my boy, and no one else.”

“ And asking your pardon,” said a piercing voice from the crowd which had drawn near the dais, “ who are you to be calling us varlets ? ” The sturdy form of Cook emerged upon the dais, followed by Isabel.

“ If there’s a law in England, you shall smart for this night’s work, and so I tell you,” said Isabel.

“ Cook—Isabel ! Run for the police,” screamed Miss Crotchett.

At the same moment there resounded heavy blows struck upon the great doors of the entrance at the further end of the hall, and voices, both deep and shrill, cried “ Open ! ” Ere Sir Marlot had cried an order, Cook and Isabel were running with extraordinary speed to the doors, which they flung open.

## VIII

### THE JUDGMENT OF SIR MARLOT

THERE entered the figure of a Knight clad in full armour, his open visor shadowing his brows and face, bearing a white shield on his left arm, and carrying a long sword upright in his gauntleted right hand. He moved slowly and cumbrously, looking neither to right nor left. On his right hand walked the damosel Florian, her black hair flowing to her knee; and on his left walked Marjorie Crotchett. The crowd of servitors and henchmen fell back on either side as the three advanced; and the Lady Griselda cried in a loud voice, lifting on high her chained hands:

“Sir Knight, I call you to deliver this noble Knight, Sir Hue of the Homestead, and me his damosel, and to take our quarrel upon you.”

The strange Knight planted a mailed foot upon the dais. At the same moment young Bors, sword in hand, sprang to him and stood back to back with him, sword in hand.

“Wit you well, lady, and you, Sir Hue of the Homestead, to that end I have come,” cried the strange Knight, so that his deep voice rang through the hall. “Sir Marlot, I know you well for one of

the wickedest knights in the world living. I require you now to deliver me this good Knight and his damosel, and all whom you have in captivity in this evil castle. Or," he added, "I shall cut off your head."

Sir Marlot's fierce little eyes narrowed, and his figure shrank together, as he faced the still steel figure.

"Ha," said he, "would you strike a naked man?"

"That would I," returned the Knight, "if he be Sir Marlot of Droon. I came not here to dally with words, but to do business, and that swiftly."

"Sir," said Sir Marlot, quavering, "you are strangely deceived. There was a jest to-night among this merry company, and great japing at this feast."

"Trust me, he lies, for he is full of deceit and there is no faith in him," broke in Sir Hue.

"See now," went on Sir Marlot, and his thin hooked nose shone with beads of sweat. "See now how my good friend Sir Hue doth jape with you. Cut his bonds an you will, for he wearies of the jest."

"That will I," said the strange Knight.

He turned aside towards Sir Hue. At the same moment Sir Marlot whistled loud and shrill, and a dozen men-at-arms poured from behind the curtain at the back of the dais. Ere the Knight could strike a blow he was borne down in the rush, and Bors, fighting like a tiger-cat, fell with him.

"Truss them well with ropes," cried Sir Marlot,



rubbing his hands. "Ah, Sir Pertinax, I know you well. You are of King Arthur's court, of that mad fellowship which pretends allegiance to a King that is not. There is no King Arthur, nor never was nor will be. To-morn there will be no Sir Pertinax, for I shall cut off his head. Let us see then if your King upon whom you call shall save you."

His loud, arrogant, menacing voice ceased, and there was silence. At the onset of the men-at-arms the whole company of guests had pressed back to the other side of the dais. The trestle-table had been overthrown and flung into the body of the hall. Sir Marlot, left alone in the middle of the dais, sank back into his high-backed chair, and fingered his beard, gazing at the two Knights and the boy Bors, who stood, bound with ropes, between two groups of men-at-arms. The helmet of Sir Pertinax had been removed and his bare head, emerging from his armour, gave him a strangely helpless appearance. It was as though a hermit-crab had been drawn from its shell.

"Ye are all in a plot, as I said," resumed Sir Marlot, speaking slowly. "I shall take order upon it." He turned to his guests. "Sir Jonas"—Mr Screwby, flushed and trembling, jerked like a man on wires. "Sir Jonas, you have a sharp wit but little spirit. You think naught of starving men's bellies and robbing them, yet you fear to slay your enemies. You tell me you are rich. So shall you be rich no more, but I will be rich in your stead, because I have talent. You shall go to prison

in a little cell of stone till you have paid ransom enow."

Mr Screwby burst into a stream of incoherent words. "Smite me that babbler upon the mouth," said Sir Marlot. And as the black-gowned man with the wand advanced upon him, old Jonas subsided suddenly.

"Dame Mary," continued Sir Marlot, "you shall stay with me, because I love you well. You shall dwell in a high chamber in the tower, and I will keep the key, sweet chuck. And you, old dame," addressing Miss Crotchett, "shall attend upon my lady." He paused, staring upon Charles Crotchett. "Varlet," he said, "you shall travel to London and fetch hither the wealth of Sir Jonas. I will keep hostage of your son and daughter, and if you return not in a month and a day, I shall sell them as serfs." Sir Marlot's gaze fell upon Miss Crotchett's two servants. "To the kitchen with you, wenches," he said. "And take in charge this damosel, this wild daughter of Sir Hue, and teach her to brew and to bake, for to-morn she will be desolate."

He paused again, and the lights in the hall and upon the dais, which were burning out, grew suddenly dim. Sir Marlot rose to his feet and turned to the mute figures of the two Knights and Bors.

"You are to prepare to die," said he. "Confess your sins one to another, for I keep no priest. Make short shrift."

With that he clapped his hands, and the silent servants in the hall extinguished the torches and dispersed. Sir Marlot made a sign, and the men-

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at-arms guarding the prisoners drew aside into the shadows. Then Sir Marlot quitted the hall, passing behind the curtain at the back of the dais. The door closed behind him with a hollow, echoing clang. A red glow shone from the great fire-place, mingling with the shafts of moonlight flowing in through the high, narrow windows. In the profound silence the night wind went by with a sighing wail.

## IX

### SEARCHINGS OF HEART

FOR a while the wind moaned and whistled about the walls without, and within there was silence. Then arose the voice of Miss Crotchett.

"Charles—and you, George and Marjorie—I feel it only right to say that I am to blame. Had it not been for a momentary loss of self-control, I should not have spoken harshly, and the children would not have run away."

"O yes, we should, Aunt Eliza," said Marjorie, eagerly. "We had made up our minds to follow the strange man—the man you heard singing."

"Yes, that was it," George joined in. "We didn't really mind what you said a little bit."

"Well, well," interposed Mr Crotchett. "We've found you at any rate."

"We've all found one another," said Miss Grey, quietly.

"If you please, sir," Cook began, stepping forward, "me and Isabel wish to ask you to take us back to London, which I understand you're going to. There's no law as I ever heard of to compel us to stop in such a 'ouse as this—or any other," added Cook, "against your own free will."

"But I shall have to leave my sister and the children," replied Charles, abstractedly, as though studying the problem. "It would be a great relief to me if you two would stay, for a time at least, to look after them. And we can't leave the other poor little girl, you know."

"Of course if you *ask* me, sir," said Cook. "Only too pleased, I am sure, to oblige. Ain't us, Isabel?"

"To be sure," said Isabel, cheerfully. "What I always say, people ain't near so bad as they look, very often."

"Well, we do see life and no mistake," remarked Cook, and retired.

"When you've quite done talking, perhaps I may be allowed a word," Mr Screwby broke in loudly. "I don't pretend to know what's happening, but it's something infernally disagreeable, nothing short of murder and robbery, so far as I can see. We must take action—*instant* action," he cried, angrily.

"And what action do you propose?" asked Mr Crotchett.

"That's just what I'm asking you, sir?" retorted the old gentleman. "You seem to take the thing as a matter of course."

"Perhaps because he is used to it," suggested Mary Grey.

"What do you mean?" snarled the old gentleman.

"There is nothing strange," said Mary, "in the strong oppressing the weak, or in the covetous

man grasping at his neighbour's goods, or in the jealousy of the old of the desires of the young. Why are you so excited, uncle? Is it because all your money is to be taken from you? It was only yesterday that you took all his money from Mr Crotchett."

"I don't wish to hear you talk of Mr Crotchett," shouted Mr Screwby. "If Mr Crotchett has anything to say, let him say it for himself."

"It's quite true," said Charles, slowly. "Things are as they were. You ask me what action we should take. It is too late, I think. You and I should have acted years ago; and then, perhaps, we should not have found ourselves face to face with consequences."

"Consequences!" repeated Mr Screwby, with great bitterness. "How was I to know that rascally cabman would drive me to this place? I was coming to visit you. You talk as if the whole of this ghastly business was my fault. What have I done, I should like to know? You and Mary there keep preaching at me, and—and I won't stand it. You got me here between you, and you've got to get me out of it."

There was no answer. In the silence the wind wailed about the walls, and there came a roll of distant thunder. The light was paling to a flaky greyness, the first glimmer of the dawn. Beside Sir Hue, who leaned against the wall, stood Florian and Bors. The Lady Griselda and Sir Hue were conversing low together. The Lady's attendant had loosed her chains, which trailed upon the

rushes, and had quitted the chamber. The group was gathered together upon the side of the dais next to the doorway leading into the interior of the castle. On the opposite side Mary Grey stood beside Mr Crotchett. At their feet George and Marjorie lay fast asleep. Marjorie had pillowed her head upon the lap of Miss Crotchett, who sat resting against the wall. The two servants were seated upon the step of the dais, leaning against each other. Mr Screwby paced uneasily up and down.

Mr Screwby was thinking strenuously. Before the mystery of the dreadful situation in which he was caught, his mind recoiled. He could make neither beginning nor end of it. His thoughts turned inward, seeking some uneasy, insistent idea which continually escaped him. There was some question which demanded an answer. What was it? Had he done something wrong? If so, what? His conscience told him that at least he had done nothing unusual; for years he had consistently followed his manner of life, which he had made entirely to suit his own tastes, and which fitted him as its carapace fits a snail. He worked hard; he was prudent; in business he never took much more advantage of others than they would like to take of him; therefore he believed that he was doing as he would be done by. Besides, business was a thing by itself, with its own rules, which everyone recognised to be necessary conditions. They might not be (indeed, they were not) of a high moral standard; but that defect was the result of the way the world was made. In his

private life it was another matter. There one tried to do good. . . . What, then, was wrong? The question irritated Mr Screwby like a pain in his inside.

Whatever it was he felt dimly that it had to do with his present plight, in which he found himself utterly helpless. Nothing in his experience came to his aid; indeed, his past life seemed incredibly far away and insignificant. He saw himself as through the wrong end of a telescope, a single unit among the hundreds of respectable, preoccupied, slightly obese persons in black, with their umbrellas and the daily newspapers, continually going to and fro and mingling together and trotting about and sitting in shabby offices and coming out again, very important, very busy. . . . About what?

Mr Screwby was amazed to perceive that for the moment he couldn't remember what all his immense and continuous activity was all about. What *was* it about? Then it occurred to him that if he could not remember, then he was lost indeed; for he could not think of any other object in life either. And then he remembered that his niece, and even that crazy fellow, Charles Crotchett, valued very greatly some other things—whatever they might be—outside practical business.

It cost the hard old man a tremendous wrench to admit even so much. But the moment the admission was made he began to feel easier. And in the same moment he perceived quite clearly that the logical development of the rules of business, carried to an extreme, was—it cost him



another twist to shape the words—the cutting off of heads. If that operation (which, it seemed, he was about to witness) were the end of the road upon which he had been obstinately travelling these many years, there must be another road leading somewhere else.

“I’ve missed it,” said Mr Screwby aloud.

No one noticed his remark. Between the intermittent roll of distant thunder the voices of people talking sounded in a continuous low murmur. Mr Screwby listened to them.

“I don’t understand why the rescue failed twice,” Mary Grey was saying.

“Well, you see,” returned Charles Crotchett, in his absent, meditative way, “poor George made a mess of it, to begin with. You see, he’s never been taught anything really useful—or rather, he’s never been taught anything else. Which is it? What ought it to be? I was brought up in one way, and I was a failure. So I tried another way with the children, and that’s a failure too. So,” he concluded, “I came to you, my dear.”

“I consider,” said Mary, firmly, “that your talk of failure is impolite, since you have come to me at last. So don’t do it again. Besides, it doesn’t account for the defeat of Sir Pertinax. I am sure he was sent by Merlin. What does it mean?”

“Where *is* Sir Pertinax?” said Charles, suddenly. He stared across the dais.

“Hush!” said Mary.

In the solemn, subdued light of the dawn the

space of wall against which the captive Knight had been leaning, and the depression in the rushes made by his feet, were plainly visible. But there was no Sir Pertinax.

"If you please, miss," said Isabel, "the soldiers are gone, too."

It was true. The guard of men-at-arms had vanished. The hall was empty.

"Why didn't you say so before, my girl?" demanded Mr Screwby, irritably.

"Nobody never asked me," said Isabel, with dignity.

"They've taken that wretched fellow in armour away to—to murder him," said Mr Screwby, with a dreadful certainty. "That's what it is, depend upon it. They'll come back for the other man. And then I suppose it will be our turn."

So daunting was this silent disappearance of the captive Knight and his guards that a new terror chilled the little group, huddled fearfully together. George and Marjorie still slept peacefully. On the other side of the dais Sir Hue and his lady and the two children, Florian and Bors, had fallen silent. They stood with fixed faces, as though listening. So still were they that they might have been carved figures. The thunder rolled nearer, and a sudden gloom filled the chamber, rent by a flash of lightning, which revealed each face to the other, spectrally frozen into a mask of suspense. Then the thunder rolled nearer, and the darkness hid the sight of the watchers one from the other. The wind cried about the walls like a lost soul, and there came

a rush of rain, with an immense and desolate sound as though it were beating upon miles and miles of leaves. The reverberations of the thunder were repeated near and far, and were thrown back and echoed again, as though the storm rolled among a vast wilderness of hills. And the watchers, crouching in that dark chamber, felt that they were islanded leagues and leagues from any other habitation of man or hope of succour, and utterly forsaken. Caged in the heart of this wild desert, they lay at the mercy of a savage old man, who lurked like a beast somewhere in the recesses of that evil house, waiting to spring upon them. The strain of waiting for they knew not what, was like the gradual tightening of a hand grasping the heart. Mr Jonas Screwby suddenly began to talk again, as though a string had been unloosed. He spoke rapidly, and in a monotone.

“No, no, I won't believe it. It's all nonsense—all preposterous nonsense. You don't tell me, after fifty years man and boy in the City, that these things can happen, sir. They can't. They simply don't occur. And as for the ordinary course of business leading to manslaughter and downright robbery, I never heard such rubbish. Nothing whatever to do with it—nothing. Let me ask you this, is this a Christian country or is it not? Are we civilised or are we not? Very well then.” He paused.

“Not but what one ought to make allowances, of course. I'll admit that. Everyone admits it. And one doesn't perhaps make the allowances one

should. Requires thought, and one doesn't think in the City, and when one gets home one is too tired, and all that. But all the same, if ever I——"

"Hark!" said Mary Grey.

From within the building there sounded a cry, long and loud. There was fear in the voice, there were fear and anger and a desperate appeal. It was three times repeated; and the third time it ceased suddenly, as though a hand were clapped upon the mouth of him who called.

"I give up," groaned Mr Screwby, after a stricken pause. "I am all wrong. I can't help it now. But I'm a British Merchant, and I can take what's to come without whining, I hope."

The rain had slackened in vehemence, and the noise of its beating had fallen to a steady hissing murmur, while the thunder rolled at longer intervals and fainter. The gloom was lightening, and the invading light was tinged with an angry red.

## X

### THE SILVER HORN

THERE was a noise of slow approaching footfalls which sounded as if someone was descending a stairway in the thickness of the wall, and there was the unmistakable jingle of steel, as though an armed man was drawing near. Then there came a shuffling sound as of two or three persons walking out of time upon the stone pavement.

The curtain hanging across the arched doorway leading from the dais was drawn softly aside; and the opening framed the short, broad figure of a man, naked to the waist and bearing upright before him a great two-handed sword, sheathed in a red scabbard, the cross of the hilt lifted high above his head. So he stood for a moment, and the light brightening in the window above made his eyes two bright points.

Then he advanced; and behind him walked a Knight bearing the white shield of Sir Pertinax, reversed, and about his head and face was wrapped a cloth of white linen. He was followed by a Knight clad in full armour, his visor closed, bearing the shield of Sir Marlot, the field of which was all of black, and upon the field was blazoned a white

gerfalcon. The Knight held a drawn sword in his hand. The procession of three passed across the dais and went on a few paces into the body of the hall, the hooded Knight stumbling upon the step, and recovering himself.

Among the watchers on the dais there were those who would have cried aloud; they struggled as with a vast load they could not lift. Sir Hue hove himself upright, and held his head erect. The two children, George and Marjorie, lay still upon the rushes, beside Miss Crotchett, whose head had fallen forward, so that she too seemed to sleep.

The man bearing the great sword stood back from the captive Knight, resting the point of the weapon upon the ground. His muscles stood out in bosses under the red fell of hair with which his body and arms were tufted. His head was bare, and his rusty locks were shorn level with his vast shoulders. The armed Knight bearing Sir Marlot's shield stood back on the other side of the prisoner, who, thus isolated, his hands bound behind his back, continually turned his hooded head from side to side, as though passionately listening for help.

A deep voice, muffled within the helm, spoke. Those watching the scene from the dais could not catch the words it said; but the captive stiffened suddenly, his head ceased its blind questing back and forth, and he stood still. The red man bearing the sword slanted the long weapon sideways, and holding the scabbard with his left hand pulled forth the bright blade. Then, grasping the hilt with both hands, he drew the sword wholly from its

sheath, and planting his feet apart swept the blade whistling in a half circle. Then, taking a pace forward to get his distance, he dropped the point, so that it touched the rushes beyond the motionless figure of the hooded Knight, and a little behind him.

The armed Knight slowly raised his sword; and as he raised it the executioner swung his great blade upwards and backwards till it flashed high above his right shoulder, and was poised. . . .

It seemed to the watchers on the dais, waiting for the sword of the Knight to fall and the blade of the executioner to sweep downwards, that they had been waiting for years and had grown old and feeble and were still waiting; when from without, somewhere in the deep of the forest, very faint and far, but clear and silvery, there fell the notes of a horn.

Instantly the armed Knight cried aloud, his hollow and deep voice resounding throughout the chamber, and springing forward his sword clashed upon the upraised sword of the executioner, who let his weapon fall.

At the same moment the silver horn sounded again, and was answered nearer, and answered again with sweet high calls. Then the armed Knight cried aloud again.

“The King!” he cried. “The King!”

And a stir and tumult arose within the castle, as though all within were suddenly awakened. Voices called one to another, now here, now there, and the whole air was filled with voices crying the same words, “The King!”

A broad calm ray of sunlight shone into the hall. The prisoner had fallen on his face on the rushes and lay there. The executioner stood looking grimly down upon the prostrate figure. The gay music of the horns rang nearer and nearer.



## XI

### “ WHEN RIDES THE KING ”

To the watchers enduring the tortures of suspense the sudden turn of affairs was far from encouraging. There, to all appearance, lay Sir Pertinax, face downwards and lifeless ; and beside him loomed the wild figure leaning on its great sword. Sir Marlot, it seemed, influenced by the sudden coming of him whom they called the King, had forborne for the moment to slay the captive Knight. But if there were to be an attack upon the castle who knew what might befall ? In the meantime the hall was filling with people : serving-men, maids, men-at-arms in leathern jackets, whose weapons gleamed here and there in the press. The Knight in armour stood on the edge of the dais, his back to the watchers, facing down the hall. Presently he cried an order ; and the executioner sheathed his long sword, slung it over his shoulder, and picking up the Knight who lay at his feet bore him to the great chair set upon the dais, and placed him on it. The captive straightened his body, sat upright, and bending his hooded head forward again seemed to listen.

At that moment a medley of horns rang loud and

sweet close without the castle; the great doors were flung open, and the people in the hall began to press towards the opening. George and Marjorie, waking, rose to their feet, and crying out joyfully, helped Miss Crotchett to rise. The Knight in armour turned to the Lady Griselda, and with a little key unlocked the gyves upon her wrist, so that they fell from her. Drawing his poniard he swiftly cut the ropes that bound Sir Hue of the Homestead. Then with the blade he pointed to the open doorway, whence a fresh wind blew into the chamber, exquisitely fragrant with the wet odours of the forest. The whole company followed the Knight down the hall and crowded in the doorway.

There, in the sunlight, grouped upon the level space of grass beyond the drawbridge, was a bright company of horsemen, hued like flowers. Their hunting tunics were of scarlet, green and blue, crimson and white and purple, glowing upon the dark barrier of the forest, with its thick canopy of vivid leaves shivering and glittering in the cool wind of the dawn. A little in advance of the company a man, wearing a thin circlet of gold about his cap, bestrode a great white horse; and at his stirrup stood a russet-clad figure wearing a scarlet cap adorned with a feather.

"Why, there's Merlin!" cried Marjorie. "I knew he would come."

The Knight in armour, bearing the shield of Sir Marlot, walked stiffly to the King, bent his knee, and stood beside Merlin. The King leaned from

his saddle, and they conversed together. Then the Knight returned to the castle, passing between the silent ranks of watching people, and went in. The company about the King ranged themselves in a half circle, the King, with Merlin at his side, being in the centre.

Presently the Knight came out, followed by two men-at-arms, who between them supported the captive Knight, his head still bound about with the napkin. Sir Hue, the Lady Griselda, Florian and Bors, stepping out of the crowd, followed behind the captive Knight.

It seemed to those watching from the doorway that Sir Marlot had brought his prisoners to be tried before the King; for they were ranged before the King, beside whom stood the Knight bearing Sir Marlot's black and silver shield, as though to accuse them.

Suddenly George and Marjorie perceived that Merlin stood beside them.

“ O, what will the King do ? ” said Marjorie, in an eager whisper.

Merlin shook his head. “ Wait,” he said.

For a time the sound of voices reached the ears of the group in the doorway, but the words were indistinguishable. Each of those arraigned before the King spoke in turn. Then there was a brief silence which was broken by the King, who cried in a loud voice, so that his words were heard by all.

“ Your lands and goods are forfeit unto this good Knight, and you are commanded to bear

neither arms nor armour for a twelvemonth, and you shall render yourself at our court at Glastonbury."

A deep murmur rose from the audience.

"What a shame!" said George, loudly.

"O, poor Sir Pertinax," said Marjorie. "And he did it all for us!"

"Watch," said Merlin.

"I cry you all to look upon the face of a traitor and a shame to the noble order of Knighthood," rang the voice of the King.

One swiftly unbound the cloth wrapped about the head of the captive Knight, and there, blinking in the sunlight, was revealed the wrinkled visage and ragged grey beard of Sir Marlot of Droon. At the same moment the Knight in armour bearing Sir Marlot's shield stepped forward, took the reversed white shield from Sir Marlot and gave to him his own black shield blazoned with the white falcon. Then the armed Knight lifted his visor, and the sun lit upon the square honest countenance of Sir Pertinax, and his white teeth gleamed as he smiled upon the King.

Then arose a great shouting, mingled with laughter.

Marjorie clasped Merlin's arm.

"How did it happen?" she asked. "Tell me, quick. Did the King know?"

"The King knew, because Sir Pertinax told him," said Merlin. "He loves to do justice merrily."

"But how did he get exchanged?" asked George.

“ Did you think Sir Pertinax was defeated ? ” said Merlin. “ It is not so easy to defeat him. But ask him.”

The sturdy Knight stood bareheaded beside them, smiling at Marjorie.

“ You are a brave damosel,” he said, in his strong voice. “ Sithence you helped to bring me hither, you have saved all.”

“ But how did you do it ? ” asked George.

As he spoke it seemed to the two children that the figures about them were beginning to grow indistinct, and the many voices rang fainter. They gazed intently upon the face of the Knight, which, shadowed by his visor, looked kindly down upon them.

“ You saw me overthrown at the first onset,” said Sir Pertinax. “ It is no mastery for one man to fight twenty, and so be slain at the end. So I spoke to the men-at-arms who were binding me, bidding them to bind me loosely, for assuredly then I would vanquish their lord, Sir Marlot, whom they hated, whereas if I were slain by them certainly the King would come to avenge me and would leave not so much as a rat alive in the Castle of Droon. So I slipped the bonds in the dark, and found Sir Marlot, and forced him to put on my harness, and I put on his, so that all his household should be deceived. Besides, it was a merry jest upon the old carle. Then I called the executioner, and I would have had him cut off the head of Sir Marlot but that I heard the trumpets of the King’s meinie, and so I kept Sir Marlot for the judgment

of the King, who hath given Sir Marlot's land and gear to Sir Hue of the Homestead."

"I call that a *real* King," said Marjorie.

Her voice sounded strangely faint in her ears, as though she was becoming deaf, and the features of the Knight were hard to discern clearly. The voices all about sounded as though far off.

"But who brought the King?" asked George.

"Merlin, of course," said Marjorie. "Hark!"

There arose the sound of a voice, singing. They looked about them. The sunlight was bright as ever, yet it seemed like sunlight beheld from a distance; the vivid figures appeared small and hard to distinguish the one from the other; there was no sound save the sound of the voice, singing:

"When rides the King at break of day,  
All evil things make haste away,  
About his path fresh blossoms spring;  
Whither he goes the sweet birds sing,  
Lifting men's hearts the heavenward way,  
When rides the King at break of day."

The melody ended in a dying fall, and all faded away.

## BOOK III

### I

#### MR CROTCHETT SEES HIS WAY

MR CROTCHETT awoke very early in the morning, and rose swiftly from his bed. His eyes were bright and his lips were moving.

"How does it go?" he murmured, as he dressed hurriedly. "I wish I had some writing-paper up here. Why don't I keep a block on my dressing-table? I shall forget before I can get downstairs, I know I shall. How does it go?"

'The King rides forth at break of morn  
The silver horns blow near and far——'

No, that's not it. It doesn't rhyme.

'At break of morn rides forth the King  
Through woods whose fresh attire of spring——'

No, that won't do. But it will come—it will come. I feel it coming. I can leave the verse and go on to the prose in the meantime."

He rubbed his hands and chuckled to himself,

put on an old dressing-gown, paused, and took it off.

"No," said Mr Crotchett, firmly. "Sir Walter Scott always dressed himself for the day when he got up early to write. No dressing-gown-and-slipper tricks for him, he said. One must begin properly."

Completing his toilette with feverish speed, Mr Crotchett went softly downstairs to the schoolroom. Seeing an exercise book belonging to George upon the table, he sat down, groped for a pen, reached for the ink, and began to write.

Presently the door opened and Miss Crotchett appeared. The old lady was dressed with her customary precision; but she looked pale, and her hands trembled slightly.

"Charles," she said, a little tremulously. "I—I am very glad to see you. It is a great relief. I—I looked into your room on my way down, and seeing it empty I thought, dear me, perhaps something has happened. Very foolish of me. Are you quite well, Charles?"

Mr Crotchett, who had not ceased to write, looked up for a moment.

"Well?" he said. "Yes, thanks. Why not? Better than I've ever felt before." He went on writing.

"I am glad," said Miss Crotchett, brightening a little. "I thought perhaps, as you had risen so early, you had slept ill."

"Why, what's the matter, Eliza? Didn't you sleep well?" asked Mr Crotchett, looking up again.



"I don't think I did," replied Miss Crotchett, nervously. "But it does not signify. Are you ready for breakfast, Charles?"

"I don't want any breakfast," said Mr Crotchett, writing busily.

"But you surely can't go to the office——"

"I'm not going to the office," said Mr Crotchett, continuing to write.

"Not going to the office!" repeated his sister, in consternation.

"No," said Mr Crotchett, writing. "Never again. Isn't it a lark, Eliza?"

"Charles!" exclaimed Miss Crotchett, and stamped her foot. "Charles! What do you mean? I insist upon an explanation."

Mr Crotchett looked up once more, and perceiving his sister to be agitated, stuck his pen behind his ear, and leaned back in his chair.

"Didn't you know?" he said. "I must have forgotten to tell you. Yes—last night Mr Screwby sent me a letter of dismissal."

"Then we are ruined," cried Miss Crotchett.

"Looking at it from one point of view, I suppose we are," said Charles. "But not immediately, you know. There's a cheque for a month's salary in lieu of notice, and—and—well, I haven't had time to think it over yet. I'm busy. Don't worry, Eliza."

"Don't worry?" repeated Miss Crotchett. "Charles, I refuse to be put off. Why, we shan't have enough even to pay the servants' wages."

"There aren't any servants," said Mr Crotchett.

"They went away last night. Didn't you know? They both gave notice, and went away. At least I think they did. They *said* they were going away."

"What nonsense," said Miss Crotchett, angrily. "Cook and Isabel are both here. I called them myself as usual. They are getting breakfast."

"That's all right then," said her brother, placidly. He took his pen from behind his ear and was beginning to write when Miss Crotchett again interrupted him.

"And what about this new governess?" she demanded. "You really must face the situation, Charles. Did you engage her?"

Mr Crotchett paused, his pen in the air.

"To tell you the honest truth, I don't know," he said dubiously.

"*You don't know! . . .*"

"Well, the fact is," began Mr Crotchett—"But I can't explain. It would take too long. She's either coming or she isn't, you know. If she comes she can explain for herself. If she don't come there's nothing *to* explain." He turned to his writing.

Miss Crotchett surveyed him with a face of despair.

"But what am I to do?" said Miss Crotchett, in a last appeal.

"You must—er—do as you think best," replied Charles, without looking up. "I'm busy."

"If I am not wanted, Charles, I can go," returned the old lady, trembling with anger. "There will

be one mouth less to feed. I will not be a burden upon you."

"Yes," said Mr Crotchett, absently. "I mean no. What did you say?"

He continued to write, bent over the exercise book, while his sister gazed at him with an expression of intense reproach, which was entirely lost on the unconscious Charles. Presently, looking up vacantly, his eyes fell upon his sister.

"Hullo, Eliza, not gone yet?" he said pleasantly; and resumed his writing.

Miss Crotchett, uttering a low incoherent sound, quitted the room.

A little after, Isabel, having knocked at the door without any result, entered the room bearing a tray, which she set down beside Mr Crotchett, who continued to write without looking up.

"Miss Crotchett said as you preferred to breakfast here, sir," hinted Isabel.

"What?" said Mr Crotchett. "O, it's you, Isabel. Take it away. I haven't time. Or, no—pour me out a cup of tea, there's a good girl, and take the rest away. I'm busy."

"Yes, sir," said Isabel.

She set a cup of tea at his elbow, and paused, her hand upon the tray.

"If you please, sir——"

"Cut me a piece of bread and butter," said Mr Crotchett.

"If you please, sir," persisted Isabel, "Cook and me wishes to say we are very sorry we give you notice."

"All right—don't do it again," said Mr Crotchett.

"And we should like to stay, sir, if you'd kindly consider it."

"Yes, yes," said Mr Crotchett. He looked up. "Is that all? O, I forgot. I haven't any more money, you know. I'm a discharged convict—I mean servant—myself, Isabel. Just tell Cook, will you? You see, I can't pay your wages after this month. I'm awfully sorry, but there it is."

"Cook and me, we agreed that wages wasn't to make no difference, sir," said Isabel. "We can wait, sir, anyways for the present. We should not," said the girl firmly, "like to leave while you was in trouble like. And as for your getting another situation, sir, I says to Cook, surely to goodness above, I says, people must be bigger fools than what they look, if they don't value the master."

"Do you know, Isabel," said Mr Crotchett, dreamily, "that's just what I've been thinking. It's very pleasant to be so encouraged when one is making a fresh start. Thank you very much. Please thank Cook for me."

"Thank you, sir." Isabel, wearing a pretty blush, softly withdrew. Mr Crotchett went on writing.

## II

### THE KING'S PORTRAIT

GEORGE and Marjorie slept late, and descended to the little breakfast-room in the basement (scene of so many gas-lit silent breakfasts eaten in haste) prepared for the scolding which Aunt Eliza never omitted on these occasions. But to their surprise, Aunt Eliza was not in the room; and the kettle, heating on the spirit-lamp, was boiling over. George immediately counted double the usual number of spoonsful of tea into the tea-pot, and poured in the water.

"I never saw you do that before," said Marjorie.

"There's no need to make remarks, if you haven't," returned George. "A man ought to be able to infuse the tea, as Aunt Eliza calls it, oughtn't he? I suppose you're like Aunt Eliza, who thinks I can't do anything useful?"

"I'm not," said Marjorie. "Anyway, I've thought of something useful to do."

"So've I," rejoined George, quickly. "Something *extraordinary* useful. Bet you what you like you haven't thought of what I've thought of?"

"Done," said Marjorie. "But promise you won't say it isn't if it is?"

"Honour bright," said George. "I thought of it the moment I woke."

"So did I."

"Well, what is it?"

"To see——"

"The King!" shouted George. "There you are."

"Ah, but you must say what for," interposed Marjorie.

"To tell him about Dad——"

"That he can't see his way clear," went on Marjorie.

"And slaves all day in a beastly office he hates——"

"Bullied by old Screwby," concluded Marjorie, triumphantly.

"We'll start directly after breakfast," said George, firmly.

"Good-morning, children." Aunt Eliza entered, a little red about the eyes, a little frostily pink about the nose, and (thought the children) singularly subdued in aspect. "What did you think of doing to-day?"

"We thought of going for a walk," said George.

"May we?" asked Marjorie.

"I should have thought you had had enough of——" began Aunt Eliza, and paused. The children looked at her curiously.

"Certainly, if you wish it," said Aunt Eliza, hurriedly. "You promise not to get lost," she added.

"We're only going as far as Buckingham Castle," said Marjorie.

Aunt Eliza started. "Castle?" she said, tremulously.

"Palace, you silly," said George, treading upon Marjorie's toes under the table. "Buckingham Palace, she means, Aunt."

"Of course," said Aunt Eliza, looking unaccountably relieved. "It is quite right that you should familiarise yourselves with the historic buildings of the Metropolis during the holidays."

"Shall we see the King, do you think?" asked Marjorie, innocently. ("Shut up, George—you hurt.")

"The King——" Again Miss Crotchett seemed unaccountably agitated. "O, quite possibly, I should think," she added, recovering composure. "His Majesty, I believe, sets an example to his loyal subjects by riding early in the morning in the Park."

"At break of day," said Marjorie absently.

"What are you quoting?" asked Aunt Eliza, uneasily.

"I don't know—nothing," said the girl.

"I say," said Marjorie as the two set forth, "what about the new governess? Wasn't she coming to-day? I can't remember."

"I can't either," George replied. "Sometimes I seem to think she is, and then I seem to think she isn't."

"Aunt Eliza would have told us if she was," said Marjorie.

"She's cunning," said George. "She may have wanted us out of the way, so as to spring the woman upon us."

"Somehow I think we shall like her," said Marjorie.

"You didn't think so yesterday," remarked George.

"No, but then I didn't know what she was like

"What do you mean? You haven't seen her, have you?"

"How could I have seen her? But I've a different sort of picture of her in my mind now," replied Marjorie.

"You're frightfully fond of making pictures in your mind," returned George. "I like to wait till I see things. I don't want to be disappointed."

"Don't you imagine, then, what the King will be like?" asked Marjorie.

"He'll ride a big white horse, and he'll wear a little gold crown instead of a ribbon in his hat," George replied at once.

"And his eyes," said Marjorie. "His eyes look right into you. Hark!" she cried. "They're blowing the horns!"

George was conscious of a sensation as of a trickle of iced water descending his spine.

"Rot," he said angrily. "How can it be horns? It's the bugles sounding at Wellington Barracks."

The sentry marching to and fro in front of the high railings which defend Buckingham Palace was a young man with red cheeks and round brown eyes. He wore an expression as fixed as his bayonet. He walked, one-two, one-two, so many paces one way, then he halted, set his heels together, did a



rapid conjuring trick with his rifle, pivoted on his heels, and walked, one-two, one-two, so many paces the other way. Then he repeated the performance. And all the while his dark brown eyes stared solemnly at the horizon, which he could not see because of the buildings.

The children watched him, fascinated. They stood exactly in front of him while he did the conjuring trick with his rifle and pivoted on his heels; but he never looked at them. At the other end of the railings another sentry was doing the same. But they never looked at each other.

"Would he answer if we spoke to him?" asked Marjorie. "Or would the other sentry bayonet him?"

"I'll try, anyhow," said George. He waited until the sentry once more came to the halt.

"Would you please tell me how we could see the King?" said George.

The sentry did not move an eyelid or a line of his red face. But as he walked away, knocking his heels, one-two, on the pavement, the children caught a sentence as it were floating in the air.

"Ask the constable on duty."

A stout policeman stood at ease beside the gateway, taking no notice whatever of the sentry, and yet including him in a kind of universal observation of the universe; as who should say, There is an ornamental soldier or two on guard, I know; these things are so; but if you want the really useful man, come to *Me*.

"I should have thought," said the policeman, reflectively, surveying the anxious children, "as a young lady and a young gentleman going to school and being 'ighly educated, would have known, without me telling them, that when the Royal Standard ain't flying, His Majesty the King is not in official residence."

He pointed solemnly upwards to the bare flagstaff.

Horribly disappointed, George drew his sister swiftly away; for he knew by experience when she was going to cry; and he did not want her to break down before this arrogant policeman.

They turned the corner, and wandered miserably up the road leading to the Marble Arch. It was deserted, save for two or three distant nursemaids wheeling perambulators; and Marjorie saw no reason why she should not have a little cry. It is more comfortable to cry when you are standing still; so Marjorie leaned against a tree and sobbed. George loitered moodily on.

Presently he was aware of a solitary horseman riding at a foot-pace up the road. George, idly observing him, noted that he had a pleasant brown face, and that he seemed to be noticing everything about him with a singular interest, as though he were a stranger. He glanced keenly at the melancholy figure of Marjorie as he rode slowly past, then turned his horse and halted beside her.

"Are you in trouble, child?" he said kindly.  
"Can I help you?"

Marjorie looked up at him, wiping her eyes with

a handkerchief which was clean the day before yesterday.

"Thank you very much," she said, "but there's nothing to be done."

"She's worried because the King is away," said George, casually, as he strolled up. "We came to see him. It's a nuisance, of course, the King being away, but it can't be helped."

"No," said the stranger. "It can't be helped. The King, you see, has to do what he is told, like other people."

"O, does he?" said Marjorie. "Why does he put up with it?"

"Well, he can't help that either. It's supposed to be his duty," said the stranger.

"Who tells him to do things?" asked George.

"They are called his Constitutional Advisers," said the stranger.

"They have got cheek," said George. "I suppose you mean Ministers, and all that lot," he added.

The stranger nodded.

"What's the use of being a King?" asked Marjorie.

"I often wonder," said the stranger. "What use did you think he could be to you, for instance?" he asked.

"We thought that people could ask the King's advice, and then he would give judgment. The King used to do that, I know," said George.

"There used to be *real* Kings," said Marjorie, wistfully.

"I think that as one reads history, one finds

that there was a much smaller population in those days; and consequently things were much simpler," observed the strange gentleman. "Don't you think so?"

"Then they might have made more Kings, so that there would be enough to go round," suggested Marjorie.

"So they have—but, you know, real Kings don't grow on every bush," said the stranger. "Some of the new ones are only bad imitations."

"Well, anyway," put in George, who thought the conversation a trifle dull, "we thought the best thing to do was to try to see the King. But it's no good, because he's away."

"Officially," said the stranger.

"What's that mean?" asked George.

"It means the same thing as 'not at home' to callers."

"You mean that the King might be in the Palace all the time?" asked Marjorie, glancing up at the long roof looming beyond the ivy-clad wall. "Is he there, now?" she asked eagerly.

"No, he's not in the Palace, as I happen to know," replied the strange gentleman. "But he might, you know, have gone away officially, and come back unofficially, and gone out riding as usual, only without equerries."

"What's equerries?" asked Marjorie.

"Charming people," said the stranger. "Full of tact. Most helpful. But one gets tired of even the most tactful companions at times; and no doubt the King likes to lose an equerry or two now

and then." He glanced over his shoulder as he spoke.

"Then we might see him?" said George.

"You might," said the stranger, smiling again. "But what, if it's not a rude question, did you want to ask him?"

"We wanted to ask his advice," said Marjorie. "We didn't want him to *give* us anything. People used to ask for a boon, you know. We don't want a boon. We merely wanted to consult him."

"You see," said George, "it's really come to a crisis. We didn't notice it before—not till we were threatened with a new governess. That made us think over everything; and we saw that my father was having a frightful struggle to make enough money, and it would be years and years before we could earn anything at this rate, and no amount of governesses would help us in the very least—besides being a bore."

"And Dad hates his work, in a horrid office all day, and he has to slave at it," Marjorie continued. "It's—it's killing him. He says himself he can't see his way clear. And he might lose his employment. He's always afraid of it, because," said Marjorie glibly, "things are so bad in the City."

"So they tell me," said the stranger, sympathetically. And he proceeded to question the children. They told him their names, and how old they were, and where they went to school, and where they lived, and what lessons they were supposed to learn.

"But what we really like, we mayn't do," said Marjorie.

"That's exactly my case," said the stranger. "But what is it you want to do?"

"I want to read ever so many books, and then I want to write books and draw the pictures for them—that sort of thing," said Marjorie.

"And you, George?"

"I don't know exactly," replied George, shyly. "But whatever it is, I want first to be an—an athlete. A first-class fighting man. I think one ought to be that," said George, simply. "And then, you see, whatever you wanted to do, you *could* do."

"My father says," put in Marjorie, "that because he did what he liked when he was a boy he is a failure now. That's part of the difficulty."

"Of the crisis," amended George.

"With great respect," said the stranger, "may it not be that your father, if—as he says—he is a failure now, would *not* have been a failure if he had gone on doing what he really liked doing? Mind! I don't *know*. It's only a suggestion on my part."

"Of course!" cried Marjorie, delightedly. "That's it! That's why he can't see his way clear. Directly I tell him, he'll see it. How frightfully clever of you!"

"You see," went on the stranger, looking earnestly down at the two eager faces, "I have lived longer than you, and I have remarked that whatever a person, man or woman, girl or boy"—he pointed to each in turn with his forefinger—"makes up his (or her) mind to do or become, that he (or she)

will become. *Really* makes up his mind, you know."

"But how?" asked Marjorie, gazing at him with bright eyes.

"Yes, how?" said George, distrustfully.

"I don't know how—nor does anyone else," returned the stranger, cheerfully. "There's only one rule: Make up your mind and stick to it. Think of where you are going to; never mind the road. The most unlikely roads have strange turnings. There! The King himself couldn't tell you more."

"How should we know him, if he came by?" asked Marjorie, looking very intently at the stranger's face.

"By his portrait, perhaps," replied the stranger. "If you will promise to shut your eyes while you count a hundred, I will show you his portrait. Are you ready?"

Marjorie, her eyes tightly shut, felt something round and hard pressed into the palm of her hand, and her fingers bent over it. George was aware of the same sensation. Then they heard the clatter of hoofs, growing rapidly fainter.

"A hundred!" said Marjorie, with a gasp.

"A hundred!" said George. "I say!"

On each palm lay a new sovereign. Both stared at the coin.

Then both looked after the horseman, but he was gone. And then they looked at one another.

"Was it—Him?" asked Marjorie, in awestruck tones.

George started as if to run, then checked himself.

"It wouldn't be fair to follow him," he said.

"Let's go home," said Marjorie, soberly. "I feel quite different somehow."

"I feel as if all this had happened before—if I could only remember when," said George, looking rather white. "Let's go."



### III

#### UNCLE JONAS THINKS IT OVER

WHEN he awoke, Mr Jonas Screwby felt excessively tired. He ached all over, as if he had been beaten with rods. His mind was clouded with a vague sense of impending disaster. He was possessed by an inexplicable dread that something had happened which would deprive him of all his money. Then he remembered, almost with relief, the angry scenes of the night before, when he had despatched that letter to his clerk, Charles Crotchett, and when his niece had quitted his house. These things, he said to himself, accounted for his uneasiness.

“I’m getting old,” said Mr Screwby. “I can’t stand agitation as I used. I must be more careful. That’s it. I must be more careful.”

He struggled out of bed, and tottered to the looking-glass, and saw therein the face of an aged man, grey, withered, the eyes bloodshot, and lips trembling. It was a disagreeable face, and it frightened Mr Screwby.

Try as he might, he could not remember if Mary Grey had returned to the house on the previous evening. He remembered her leaving the room; and he had a strong impression that she had gone

out of the house afterwards, and that he had had the intention of following her—or did he follow her?

“My mind’s going,” said Mr Screwby.

While he was dressing, he decided feverishly that of course his niece had really returned; that she had merely said she would leave him in a moment of exasperation; and that he would find her seated behind the silver coffee-pot as usual.

It was with a dreadful sinking of the heart that, upon entering the great gaunt dining-room, he found himself alone, and perceived that the table was set out for one person instead of two.

After a momentary hesitation he rang the bell.

“Where is Miss Grey?” he enquired of the parlourmaid.

“Miss Grey left the ’ouse last night, sir,” replied the girl.

Her tone unmistakably implied that she knew a great deal more than her words conveyed, and Mr Screwby saw that he had made a mistake in asking the question.

“Of course I know that,” he returned sharply. “But she expected to be in to breakfast this morning.”

“I understood that Miss Grey was not returning for some time, sir,” said the parlourmaid; and Mr Screwby saw that he had made another mistake. “Perhaps the note what came for you this morning was from Miss Grey, sir,” she suggested.

“What note?” growled the old man.

“I put it on your plate—along of the flowers,”

replied the girl, whose evidently acute interest in the situation maddened Mr Screwby.

"That will do," he said. "You can go."

"Thank you, sir." But she did not go. She trimmed the fire with great deliberation, put coal upon it, piece by piece, went to the window, adjusted the curtains, and crossed the room to the sideboard. Mr Screwby, suffering agonies of suspense until he could read the note lying on his plate, yet determined to baffle the girl's curiosity, affected to be absorbed in the newspaper. He dared not speak to her again.

"I shall stand here," said Mr Screwby within himself, "till she goes, if I stand here all day." He continued to read the money article, grinding his teeth, and glaring out of the corners of his eyes at the parlourmaid; who, presently perceiving that she was defeated, left the room.

Mr Screwby pounced upon the letter and tore it open. Within, written in Mary Grey's neat round hand, were these lines:—

"There's rosemary, that's for remembrance;  
pray, love, remember; and there is pansies, that's  
for thoughts."

"Now what in the world——" said Mr Screwby.

He unwound the paper in which the posy was wrapped, and absently put the flowers to his nose.

"I suppose," said Mr Screwby, "as the grammar is all wrong, it must be a quotation. Why can't the girl say what she means? But that's just like a woman."

He began to eat his breakfast, pausing now and again to scrutinise the message.

“ ‘ Remembrance, ’ ” growled the old man. “ Aye, if I *could* only remember! What is it I can't remember this morning? Something dashed important, I believe. I can't even remember what it is I've forgotten. And 'thoughts'? What thoughts? I suppose she means I ought to be thinking of her. So I am. She's taken very good care I shouldn't be able to think of anything else—the minx.”

He went on with his breakfast.

“ I expect she means it kindly, ” he said, grudgingly.

He went on with his breakfast.

“ She wants to make it up, ” he said. “ No doubt. She's in the wrong. So she is trying the sentimental dodge. Won't do, my girl, won't do. I suppose she thought the lonely old man would look at the flowers, until the tears came into his eyes at the thought of childhood's hour, and all that. No use—I never was a child that I can remember. As for her, she's never been anything else.”

He took up the flowers, and put them down.

The parlourmaid entered.

“ Did you ring, sir? ”

“ No, I did not, ” said Mr Screwby, hastily putting into his pocket the paper inscribed by Mary Grey.

“ Shall I put the flowers in water, sir? ”

“ No, you shall not, ” retorted Mr Screwby.

And taking the flowers in his hand, he marched past the girl, shut himself into his study, and lit a cigar with trembling fingers.

"These women will drive me mad," said Mr Screwby. "I never noticed them before. I don't even know their confounded names."

He sat down to consider the situation. Last night he believed that he had acted with the promptness and decision proper to a self-respecting business man. This morning, although he could detect no flaw in his proceedings, the more he thought of them, the more uncomfortable he became. Take the case (he reflected) of Mary Grey. He perceived that, as a matter of fact, she had defeated him; for, if she really chose to defy him, he was helpless. It is useless to say you can't do this, or you shan't do the other, if the rebel replies, I will. Nothing then remains but to employ force . . . Chain her up, for instance.

Mr Screwby felt suddenly uncomfortable, as though the nerve of a painful remembrance was thrilled. "No, no," he said uneasily, "that would never do."

Well, then, if Mary Grey chose to leave him, leave him she would. But as for her taking a situation with his clerk, Charles Crotchett, that was absurd. He had stopped that freak, at least, by the simple process of depriving Mr Crotchett of his livelihood. People without any money cannot engage governesses. And Mr Screwby knew Charles Crotchett well enough to feel sure that Crotchett's pride would prevent him from incurring obligations which he could not repay. But, again, Crotchett might get another post; in fact, if he could continue to live through a certain interval

he would certainly find employment. Mr Screwby could not refuse to give him testimony to his excellent character; for a refusal might lead to awkward reprisals. What would his City friends say, when they learned that his niece had quarrelled with him concerning his own clerk? Mr Screwby knew very well what they would say. They were a coarse-tongued lot, thought Mr Screwby.

At this point it occurred to Mr Screwby that if Crotchett entered the employment of a rival firm he might very easily injure Mr Screwby's interests considerably. Crotchett knew a great deal about Mr Screwby's methods of business; and although Mr Screwby did not think that Charles would deliberately revenge himself, he might be compelled in the course of his duties to use his knowledge. Perhaps (thought old Jonas) it was this consideration which, hitherto hidden at the back of his mind, made him so nervous about his business this morning.

But there were other reasons. Deep down in his heart he knew very well that his business, like the business of many another successful man, was founded on no firm basis, nor was it administered by an intelligent organisation, understood by his staff, which if necessary could run by itself for a while. Indeed, Mr Screwby's business was a patchwork of shifty enterprises, evasions, with hand-to-mouth intrigue, mean economies, illicit commissions, and jealous secrecy. He had made it; he had seen his partners out; and only he could conduct it.

Could he afford to lose a valuable servant? For

Crotchett, absent-minded and wholly lacking in what Mr Screwby called business initiative, by which he meant a kind of low cunning, was indefatigably plodding and absolutely trustworthy.

"What," said Mr Screwby, "would happen if I was to fail in my faculties? I don't feel at all the thing this morning. Perhaps it was the claret last night."

He tried to remember what was the particular wine he had drunk, and failed. But he had an impression that it was a vintage which was new to him. Rather a heavy wine, too.

"My memory's going," said Mr Screwby.

A knock upon the door startled him. No one ever came to the study at this hour. It was understood that he must not be disturbed.

"If you please, sir, the greengrocer," said the parlourmaid.

"What do you mean?"

"Called for orders," said the parlourmaid.

"What's that to do with me?" said Mr Screwby, angrily.

"Miss Grey not being here, sir——"

"Tell him to go away—at once," said Mr Screwby; and resumed his doleful meditations.

Something must be done. But what? Could he bring himself to cancel Crotchett's dismissal? But if he could, Mary Grey would probably become governess to his children. What right, said Mr Screwby, bitterly, has the fellow to have children at all, on his salary?

Another knock upon the door.

“ If you please, sir, the butcher. ”

“ Tell him to go away, ” said Mr Screwby. “ How dare you come to me about a butcher ? ”

“ I was to say there’s nothing in the ’ouse, sir, ” said the parlourmaid.

“ I’m dining at the club, ” said Mr Screwby.

That was a good idea, thought old Jonas, as his terrible parlour maid again departed. And he resolved to live entirely at the club until times improved. Clearly his house was impossible—not a moment’s peace could he enjoy. And it would become worse.

To continue. Should he, or should he not re-instate Crotchett ?

Another knock, and the maid appeared once more. This time she deposited a thin red volume upon the writing-table, and withdrew. Mr Screwby scrutinised it through his double glasses. It bore, in gold letters, the name of a purveyor of milk.

Mr Screwby resumed his meditations. He was just becoming conscious that a plan was forming itself in his head, when the parlourmaid again entered, silently placed another thin volume on the table, and withdrew. It was bound in black, and a legend in gold set forth the virtues of a baker.

Mr Screwby had reached the limit of endurance. He fled from his desecrated study into the hall. There was the parlourmaid.

“ Where’s my coat ? ” demanded Mr Screwby, groping furiously among the various overcoats hanging on the wall.

“ I don’t know, I’m sure, sir. I expect, ” said



the maid, brightly, "it's taken away to be brushed. I'll go and see."

Mr Screwby, coatless and raging, paced up and down the hall for full ten minutes before the parlourmaid returned with the missing garment.

"Now," said Mr Screwby, "I have just one word to say to you, my girl. You can go. Take a month's notice. And tell the others to do the same—the whole lot of you. Do you understand?"

"Speaking for myself, sir," replied the girl, pertly, "I shouldn't wish to stay, sir, not in any case, now that Miss Grey has been driven out of 'ouse and home. And I'm sure the other girls will say the same."

Old Jonas glared at her.

"Shall I call a cab for you, sir?" asked the parlourmaid, unabashed.

"What's that?" said Mr Screwby, starting at the word. "A cab, did you say? What cab? Where is there a cab?"

Opening the front door, he gazed apprehensively up and down the road. "Did you say there was a four-wheeler?" asked Mr Screwby, unaccountably agitated. "No, I won't have it. I don't want it. Certainly not. I shall walk. You know perfectly well I always walk."

"You had a cab last night, sir," urged the girl, in aggrieved accents.

"Yes," said Mr Screwby. "That's why I don't want one this morning."

He descended the steps and walked briskly away.

"Going dotty, that's what *you* are, old gentle-

man," said the parlourmaid to her master's retreating figure.

Mr Screwby murmured to himself as he walked. " ' Remembrance '—I wish I could remember why I'm afraid of a four-wheeler. ' Thought '—ah, there's too much of that altogether this morning. . . . ' Pray, love, remember, ' " repeated old Jonas. " There's no doubt about it, I am fond of the girl—come to think of it . . . and how to live in that house without her is more than I know. . . . It was kind of her to send those flowers," said Mr Screwby.

## IV

### ROSEMARY AND PANSIES

MARY GREY left her hotel early in the morning, and walked towards Westminster. The streets were silent ; the gaunt houses on either side had a furtive aspect, as though masking innumerable secrets ; the Abbey, like a vast ship of stone, hove upon a sky faintly hued with rose. Mary wondered which was real : this huge and silent catacomb of buildings channelled with solitary ravines of streets, stretching on and on ; or the glowing city of her dreams.

She had made her choice : to-day she must ensue it. She had snapped her fetters (Mary glanced at her wrists) ; now she must make good her freedom. She must win it by herself, alone. Behind her was a life all compact of stale trifles : of comfort without enjoyment, of distraction without pleasure : of ordering dinner, counting the linen, arranging flowers, remonstrating with the butcher, buying things she did not want, dressing without anyone to admire her, reading books which were all alike and all dull, trying for ever to keep Uncle Jonas in a good temper ; a dead body of a life, from which the spirit had fled.

Before her—what? She leaned upon the rough stone coping of the balustrade of the Embankment, and watched the gold of the eastern sky glitter upon the water, and the black barges drifting down upon the tide, and the sea-gulls swooping and flying; and she felt very lonely. She recalled how during the past year she had stood in that place with a grey-haired, bright-eyed, shabby clerk, and they had talked together.

“Why, now,” he had said, “look at those grim factories on the further shore, filled with white-faced men and women—wouldn’t it be glorious if we could feel that they were all happy and contented and had enough to eat and a pleasant home? But we can’t. And yet the desire is strong in your heart and in mine and in the hearts of ever so many people. And still things go on.”

“If the people themselves only wished hard enough——” Mary had answered.

“What do you and I gain by wishing?” said Mr Crotchett—she knew his name now.

Mary had had no answer then, but she had one now. So had Mr Crotchett. She had struck for freedom; and the result was that her friend had lost his means of livelihood. Her duty was clear. She had a little fortune of her own, of £175 a year. He must be made to share it. But how to persuade Mr Crotchett to take money from his holiday governess, she did not know. He would feel disgraced. Of course if she were married to him, the thing might be done. Miss Grey contemplated the prospect calmly.

"Now if I were a heroine in a novel," she said to the sea-gulls, "I should blush at the thought. I should put it away from me. I should feel as if there was something the matter with me, but I shouldn't know what it was. I should become sad-eyed and pensive. I should probably resolve to take up nursing as a profession. And then, after playing a long game of cross-purposes, I should say, 'Charles, shall I tell you something?' And he would say, 'Yes, darling, what is troubling my little one?' And I should say, 'Charles, I have loved you all my life.'"

She laughed aloud.

"What's the joke, missie?" said a hoarse voice close by.

Mary perceived an old man, clad in rough blue clothes, looking at her reproachfully. About his head circled the sea-gulls, uttering their harsh cries, and dashing down upon the little fish which the old man was taking from a basket, and placing upon the coping of the balustrade.

"I beg your pardon," said Mary. "I was thinking of something."

"Ah," said the old man, mollified. "That's it, is it? I thought you was a-laughing at me and my birds. Folk ashore (begging your pardon) are so ignorant."

"Are they?" said Mary, smiling at him. His face was the colour of dull mahogany, seamed and scarred; innumerable wrinkles clustered about his narrow blue eyes; his neck and throat, which were bare, were tawny and rough like shark-skin.

"They are so," pursued the old man. "Why, if I was to tell them that these here sea-birds are the souls of poor dead-and-drowned mariners, they wouldn't believe me. But it's true. The souls of dead sailors, they live in the bodies of sea-gulls. Every sailor knows that. Same as they know a deal what's hidden from the poor folk ashore. How can people on shore know anything what's any good to them, all mewed up in streets and houses from year's end to year's end, and never seeing the wonders of the Lord on the deep?"

"But how do you know sailors become sea-gulls when they die?" asked Mary.

"How do I know? Same as I know anything else," returned the old seaman. "How do I know there's a shower of rain a-coming"—he cast a rapid glance at the bright sky—"which will fall at seven bells, as near as may be. I do know. And when you know, you know," said he.

"All the same," said Mary, "it's sometimes difficult to know what to do next?"

The sailor looked at her with a glance that seemed to withdraw itself from immense distances.

"You follow your heart, missie," said he. "You won't go wrong." And he turned away and whistled to the gulls.

Mary went on her way, pondering. "When you know, you know," and, "follow your heart," said the sailor. How was it then, that so many went astray? Why had her Uncle Jonas so obstinately spent his whole life in disgusting toil, which was really directed to getting other people's money, and which

had made him a greedy, tyrannical, selfish, tedious old man.

"Yet I dreamed," said Mary, "that when he saw what he was really doing, he changed. But it was only a dream."

As she walked, the streets were becoming thronged with hastening pale people; all in a hurry, all with grave set faces. No one spoke to another. Each went straight before him, as regardless of his fellows as though he were alone in a wilderness. Mary had a strange fancy that if her vision were enlarged, she would see each person enclosed in a transparent vessel, separating him inexorably from his fellow; and from within that vessel thin coloured flames flickered towards the sky and melted into the light.

"They don't know it," she said, "but they are all part of the scheme. Uncle Jonas doesn't know it. But how much happier he would be if he did. He has a flame hidden somewhere, if he could only let it burn."

As she ascended the steep street leading from the riverside, the fancy possessed her, so that she found herself disregarding the outward appearance, the respectable wrappings of ugly clothes, the defensive masks of countenances, and looking for the aerial flames which were the emanation of the real man. She came into Covent Garden, among the weary-eyed men and women sitting on baskets, and the tired great horses, and the banks of blossom; and there in the flowers she perceived the coloured aerial flames to be woven into a delicate fabric, and she thought, the flowers can remind us. And, "surely they

always remind us. They are the eyes of heaven." She bought rosemary, blue like the sky, and pansies, purple like the vault of night, and yellow like the butterfly of spring; and sent them, with the poet's interpretation thereof, to Mr Screwby.

Then, feeling very hungry, she went into a coffee-shop, where rough carters, and earthy labourers, and shawled women were eating and drinking. They sat before narrow tables covered with stained cloths, upon wooden seats fixed against wooden partitions. Mary was afraid lest someone should address her rudely, or that the company would stare at her. But no one spoke to her; the people scarce looked at her; they received her as a matter of course, and passed her the sugar. She drank a large cupful of coarse coffee, and devoured an immense crusty ham sandwich, and paid sixpence. She thought of Uncle Jonas, fuming alone in his great gloomy house, and wondered what he would have said had he known where she was breakfasting. Mr Screwby would rather starve than enter a common eating-house. He would rather go empty than lunch in the same building with his clerks. Mary thought with surprise upon the narrow track which Mr Screwby and his like had made for themselves, like a rat-run. Marked upon a map, it would run in a zig-zag course from a particular house to a particular point in the City, whence shorter lines would radiate into the City itself; another line would run from the house to the church; and yet another (not yet upon the map) from the house to a suburban cemetery. And that was all. The rest, to the mind of Mr Screwby, was



blank as the map of Africa. And (thought Mary Grey) her own chart showed very little more enterprise.

But a line ran to Maida Vale, at least. And walking now in the full tide of the plangent streets in the hard light of the common day, Mary began to feel afraid. In all her seven-and-twenty years, she had never before been compelled to face an emergency.

After all, she knew very little of Charles Crotchett. She knew him for a whimsical, dreamy, courteous person, with whom she had drifted into a kind of friendship, meeting him first by accident, and afterwards by arrangement. He possessed the kind of mind she liked, and that was all she knew of him. He had discussed with her schemes for the welfare of his children; and it was at her suggestion that he had advertised for a holiday governess. It was afterwards that she had suddenly determined to apply for the situation herself. And immediately, she reflected, all this trouble had befallen. The moment she began to act for herself, all sorts of angry people arose to stop her. But she knew she was right. "And when you know, you know."

In all the old stories, thought Mary, steadily walking westward, however long the oppression lasted, however triumphant was the evil power, whatever suffering was caused by the covetous man, the deliverer came at the last. The chains were loosed, the rich man was deprived of his goods, the poor man was uplifted; and if all else failed, the King himself did justice.

“ ‘All evil things shall flee away,’ ” she said to herself. And there ran through her mind a swift vision, like an experience recalled ; yet she could not remember reading or hearing of it. She saw again a lighted feast, and an old, strange man, and a girl like herself who was in distress ; somehow her uncle was there too, and Charles Crotchett, and there were faces she did not know, and a great crowd in the shadows. Then she remembered a feeling of helpless terror, and awaiting in the dark for a blow to fall till she longed to scream aloud, but could not, and the roll of thunder and an intolerable weight in the air. She remembered thinking “ if we escape from this place, then anything is possible, and I shall never be afraid again.” And yet, terrified as she was, she was aware of a kind of certainty that some unseen magic force was even then working her deliverance ; so that when the doors were flung open, and they all went out into the sunshine, and the sweet air rang with gay music, she was hardly surprised ; rather (she remembered) was she conscious of a warm and comfortable glow, as of a belief hardly tested but finally triumphant.

The vision left her, as though a shutter had closed suddenly ; nor, when she tried, could she recall it. But the pleasant warmth still glowed throughout her frame ; and she walked with a quiet heart.

V

MR SCREWBYP MAKES ALLOWANCES

MR CHARLES CROTCHETT had finished Chapter I. (which he called "The Quest") and was in the middle of Chapter II. when Mr Jonas Screwby was shown into the room.

He placed his visitor in the worn old arm-chair beside the fire, leaned against the mantelpiece, stuck his pen behind his ear, and smoothing his disordered hair, looked gravely down at his quondam employer.

"Do you know," said Charles, unexpectedly, "it's very curious you should have come in at this particular moment, because—not to mention other reasons—I was just writing about you."

"What do you mean?" enquired Mr Screwby, with intense suspicion. "To whom, sir, are you writing about me?"

"To myself," said Charles. "Of course, I've given you another name. I'm writing a story," he explained. "A romance."

"A what!" said Mr Screwby.

"Well, I must do something, now you've given me the sack," said Charles, apologetically. "The fact is, I've always wanted to do something of the sort,

only I didn't know exactly what it was I did want. Besides, I've never been free before."

"Free, do you call it?" Mr Screwby's face expressed stupefaction.

"What would *you* call it?" asked Charles, meekly.

"Starvation," replied Mr Screwby. "Do you really stand there and tell me—*me*—that you propose to earn a living by writing *stories*?"

"Well, to tell you the honest truth, I haven't had time to think about the living part of it," said Charles. "You see, I've been very busy all the morning."

"Do you mean to say that after—after what's occurred—you got up this morning and sat down straight away to write a—a story?"

"I couldn't help it," returned Charles. "It was all in my head when I woke up. I must have had a dream——"

"A dream?" Mr Screwby stared at him. "What sort of a dream?"

"O, a great dream. That's why I was in so great a hurry to put it all down. I might forget it. One does forget dreams."

"A very good thing, too," said old Jonas, fingering his beard and staring gloomily at the carpet. "Dreams!" He shuddered slightly. "The fact is, Crotchett, I don't feel quite the thing this morning—not quite the thing. A touch of liver. I daresay I had it coming on last night, when I sent you that letter."

"It was a little—livery—in tone," said Charles. "But never mind."

"Never mind, sir! What do you mean? I *do* mind." Mr Screwby controlled his irritation with obvious difficulty. "Why do you suppose I took the trouble to come round here this morning?"

Charles made no reply; but a look of apprehension stole over his features.

"I came," resumed Mr Screwby, after a pause, "to discuss matters with you. We are two business men: you know as well as I do that business is a matter of give-and-take."

Charles opened his mouth as if to speak, and shut it again, his look of apprehension intensifying.

"I was upset last night, I don't care to deny it," Mr Screwby continued. "I may have said more than I meant. Come! I don't want to lose a good servant—you don't want to lose (I won't say a good employer, because self-praise is no recommendation), a safe billet."

"Do you mean you want me to come back again?" demanded Charles, in tones of such dismay that Mr Screwby looked at him in astonishment.

"I am certainly prepared to make an offer—on conditions," said old Jonas.

"Well, let's have it," said Charles, abruptly.

"I must say your manner is not conciliatory—not conciliatory at all, Crotchett," Mr Screwby remonstrated. "Of course if you don't want to return, say so, say so."

"It's not what I want," said Charles, desperately clutching his hair. "It never is, and I suppose it never will be. It's what must be, for the sake of the children."

“Now you’re beginning to talk sense,” said Mr Screwby. “And I must say it’s for the first time. I can make allowances”—he stopped, as though confused. “I can make allowances,” he went on firmly, after a pause, “for the shock my letter no doubt caused you. But to talk of earning your living by literature, at your age, my dear Crotchett—I say at your age, and without any previous knowledge—why, the thing’s madness! Even the most successful authors make nothing—absolutely nothing—compared with a successful business man. And how can you hope to succeed? There. Let us put all that nonsense on one side, as the impulse of a moment.”

Charles, all shrunken together, his hands hanging loosely at his side, gazed with a white and miserable face at his old employer.

“Of course,” said Mr Screwby, clearing his throat, “you understand I can’t allow my niece to come to your house, or anything of that sort. Girls will take these fancies into their heads; and, as a sensible man of the world, you’ll agree with me that they must be dealt with firmly. Firmly. I understand that when she made this ridiculous engagement, she did not tell you who she was?”

Charles shook his head.

“I didn’t care who she was,” he said.

“Hah,” said Mr Screwby, “very unbusinesslike—very indiscreet. But I’ll take your word for it. I shall of course speak to the girl herself, when—when I find opportunity. In the meantime, we may

consider the affair over. Over. May I take it that you agree with me?"

"O yes," said Charles. "By the way," he added, "did you tell Miss Grey you were coming to me with this proposition?"

"No, sir, I did not. I am not in the habit of consulting my niece upon my actions," replied the old man, tartly.

"Well, she'll do as she likes, I suppose," said Charles. "So far as I am concerned, of course, I am helpless in the matter. I mean, I am bound to agree to your conditions, in the circumstances."

"Very well, then," said Mr Screwby, rising. "We will consider the matter settled. We need not refer to it again. I think, too, it would be well if you took your holiday, now, beginning to-day. No doubt you will go down to the seaside. And by the way, the cheque I sent you—consider it a bonus. It will come in handy for holiday expenses."

"Thank you, sir," said the wretched Crotchett.

When his employer had gone, Charles sat down before his despised writing, and pushed it wearily away.

"A fortnight's reprieve," he said. "And then . . ."

## VI

### MARY GREY IS DEFEATED

MISS CROTCHETT, who had learned from the servants that the great and dreaded Mr Jonas Screwby had come and gone, was instantly possessed by a burning curiosity to know what had happened. She sought her brother, whom she found sitting at the table with his head in his hands, like a man shipwrecked.

“What has happened, Charles?”

“Everything. It’s all up—all over,” replied her brother. Then, observing Miss Crotchett’s look of consternation, he added with a dreary smile, “I mean, of course, everything is all right. It—it was a mistake. I am to go back to business as usual.”

“Heaven be praised,” said Miss Crotchett, devoutly.

“O yes,” said Charles.

“The shock has been too much for you,” went on his sister, regarding him anxiously. “No wonder. I quite understand how you feel. You cannot yet realise the good news.”

“That’s it,” said Charles. “I shall get used to it in time. I am glad that—that you’re glad, Lizzie.”



"The relief," said Miss Crotchett, "is unspeakable. I fear," she went on, tremulously, "I gave way to a momentary impatience this morning, Charles. I—I beg your pardon. I was much agitated."

"I hadn't noticed it, I assure you," said Charles, truthfully. He glanced at the copy book, lying forlornly open. "I was very busy at the time."

"And now," went on Miss Crotchett, brightly, "you need not go on with your writing, whatever it was."

Charles looked at her in silence.

"By the way," said Miss Crotchett, "about the—the new governess? I——"

"She's not coming," said Charles, hastily.

"Not coming?"

"No. She—I mean, I, er—I've changed my mind."

"Dear me," said his sister, anxiously. "Not, I hope, my dear Charles, in consequence of anything I said? I have been thinking over the matter, and I see that I was wrong. It is quite time that the children had a younger mind with them—I feel that. Of course, this morning—but now you can once more afford the expense, why not engage this lady?"

"It is very kind of you to suggest it, Lizzie—very kind," said Charles, clutching his dishevelled locks. "But—no. I've changed my mind. Do not let us discuss the matter. It's useless."

“Very well. You know best, Charles,” said his sister, with unusual docility. “I will of course continue to do what I can for the children. It is always a little difficult in the holidays——”

“Talking of holidays,” said Charles, abruptly, “that reminds me. I am taking my holiday now. You had better go away with the children to the seaside. Why not this afternoon?”

“Are you not coming with us, Charles? You need a holiday more than anyone.” Miss Crotchett was deeply dismayed.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. I shall probably stay here, at any rate, for a day or two. You must make your arrangements without me. O yes, and here’s a cheque—where is the beastly cheque?” He groped in his pockets. “Here you are.” He endorsed it, and handed it to his sister, who took it without looking at it.

“But——” she began.

“It’s all right,” Charles interrupted her. “There’s nothing to explain—nothing whatever. I’m just going out for a walk—on business.” And he went out of the room and out of the house.

Miss Crotchett, being a practical person, did not waste time in unprofitable anxiety concerning the conduct of her erratic brother.

“I shouldn’t wonder,” she reflected shrewdly, “if he was actually upset at the idea of returning to the office—Charles always disliked routine; but he’ll get over it. What else can he do?” She began immediately to make methodical preparations for the journey. Presently she was

interrupted by Isabel, who announced that a lady was waiting to see her.

"Not the new governess?" said Miss Crotchett, impulsively.

"The lady what came last night," said Isabel. "She asked particularly for you, miss."

"I had better see her," said Miss Crotchett, hesitating.

"I'm sure you'll like the looks of her, miss," said Isabel, encouragingly.

Miss Crotchett, upon entering the room, stopped short.

"I beg your pardon," she said. "I thought for a moment that we must have met before. I cannot remember where."

"And I," said the lady, smiling, "seem to know you already, from what your brother has told me of you." When she smiled, her dark eyes narrowed.

Miss Crotchett reflected that this handsome, self-possessed young woman differed extremely from her anticipation.

"I am so very sorry," said Miss Crotchett, and she meant it. "I am so very sorry that my brother—he is unfortunately out just now—has changed his mind with regard to—to yourself."

"Indeed," said Mary Grey. Her vivid face paled and sharpened.

"I am so sorry," repeated Miss Crotchett. "I know no more than that. Last night——" she paused, with a look of confusion.

"Yes?" said Mary.

"Last night," continued the old lady, "our plans

were upset by a piece of bad news ; and although this morning—indeed, but an hour ago—it proved to be a mistake, my brother was naturally somewhat upset.”

“ I understood—last night—that Mr Crotchett had lost—had resigned—his appointment,” said Mary. “ I hope it is not impertinent in me to ask if that was the bad news which proved to be a mistake ? ”

Miss Crotchett nodded her head.

“ Of course,” she said, “ it’s not a thing which we——”

“ I understand,” said Mary. She gazed thoughtfully at the ground.

“ May I ask one more question ? It was not—Mr Crotchett’s change of plan was not—due to any question of remuneration, or salary ? ” said Mary.

“ He did not say. I believe not,” said Miss Crotchett.

“ Because,” said Mary, and paused. “ But it does not matter now.”

“ I am very sorry,” repeated Miss Crotchett. “ I was telling my brother only this morning that I thought the children needed a new influence ; and I feel sure that you——” she stopped.

“ I think it is I that need the children,” said Mary Grey. “ I wonder,” she added, “ if I might see them.”

“ I should like you to see them,” said Miss Crotchett, rising.

She found George and Marjorie in the schoolroom,

talking earnestly together; and was somewhat surprised that they consented without demur to see a strange visitor.

Both went to Mary Grey at once, and stood looking at her face, while she kept a hand on the shoulder of each.

"Haven't we seen you before?" said Marjorie, boldly.

"Where, do you think?" asked the strange lady, smiling.

"I know," whispered George.

"Hush!" said Mary.

"How odd," said Miss Crotchett, conversationally, "that the children should have the same impression as I had."

When Mary said that she must go, the children hung close to her, and went with her to the front door, and waved to her as she turned.

"Who was that?" asked George.

"You would never guess," replied his Aunt. "She was to have been your new governess. But your father has changed his mind."

"Do you mean she isn't coming?" asked Marjorie in tones of dismay.

"I call it a beastly shame," said George.

"You did not speak in this way yesterday," remarked Miss Crotchett.

"No, but that *was* yesterday," said Marjorie.

"The Governor," said George, loftily, "must change his mind again, that's all."

"That is not a proper way in which to speak," said his Aunt. "Now run and get ready for your

journey. We are going away for a fortnight to the seaside."

"I don't want to go to the seaside," said George, sulkily.

"Isn't Daddy coming?" asked Marjorie.

"I do not think so," replied her Aunt.

"Well, then, I don't want to go either," said Marjorie.

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## VII

### MR CROTCHETT TAKES ADVICE

MR CROTCHETT returned to a singularly discontented and agitated household ; a state of things with which he felt thoroughly in sympathy. He had gone out into the fresh air to rid himself of a dream : a dream of sudden liberty, of new prospects opening, of ambition pursued and perhaps attained. . . . He detached it as he walked, and dropped it piece by piece upon the grey pavement. He set his mind steadily to face the return to the City ; the resumption of the daily journey to the office in the morning ; the daily drudgery ; the nightly return. He knew that he could again stifle and subdue his aspirations to a kind of dull and painless quiescence. As for the writing he had begun, he would destroy it. He would not finish it. Life must be one thing or the other ; and the first thing to do was to earn a secure income ; small, but certain ; so that the children should have a fair chance in the world. After all—and this was the most dismal reflection of all—he ought to be glad and grateful. When he thought of Mary Grey, his mind was an aching confusion. He had given her up for the sake of a salary. Probably he would never see her again.

He supposed that she was at home with Mr Screwby. All that was over. . . .

Mr Crotchett, taking his dream to pieces and dropping them on the grey pavement as he went along, contemplated himself as he had been before Mr Screwby's saturnine intervention had cast him back upon iron realities, and he began to feel a kind of shamed surprise at that inspired lunatic, Charles Crotchett. He had actually risen up that morning wholly oblivious that he was a ruined man, a discharged clerk, and had sat down to his writing with a song in his heart. What a fool, thought Mr Crotchett, cheerlessly; what a thoughtless imbecile. If people knew of this strange seizure, they would never trust him as a responsible person again. Who was he, Charles Crotchett, to attempt an enterprise in which men gifted with fifty times his ability and owning every advantage which he lacked, had failed? Get to your stool again, foolish grizzle-pate—get to your stool, and be thankful you have a desk whose dead wood still yields sustenance.

So Charles Crotchett, trudging through the streets unseeing, took his dream to pieces and dropped them in the gutter. But all the while he strictly schooled himself, he was aware of a small rebellious voice within him, which kept saying, "You were right this morning, all the same." Charles stopped his ears, and came home to the cold mutton.

He found his son and daughter, with their heads close together, perusing the manuscript he had left on the schoolroom table. It did not occur to them



either that their father might desire to keep his writing private, or that if he did he would be angry with them.

"Did you write all this while we were out? I think it's splendid," said Marjorie.

"Just as if it had really happened," said George.

"Do you think so?" said Mr Crotchett, greatly cheered. "I was going to destroy it."

"Certainly not," said Marjorie. "Why did you begin it, if you are going to chuck it just as it's getting exciting?"

"Well, you see," said her father, slowly, "it was what I wanted to do. But since then I find I can't do it."

"You should make up your mind—*really* make it up, mind you," said Marjorie. "And then you'll find you can."

"The King told us so this morning," added George, casually.

"Who?"

"Well, he said the King himself couldn't give us better advice," Marjorie amended. "It was a strange man riding on a horse."

"'When rides the King'"—murmured Mr Crotchett.

"'At break of day,'" Marjorie chimed in.

They looked at each other.

"Why did you say that, my dear?" asked Mr Crotchett.

"Why did *you*?"

"Something of the sort has been running in my head all the morning—I suppose it's thought-trans-

ference." Mr Crotchett clutched his hair. "But who was this person riding on a horse?"

"We don't know—he didn't tell us," said George. He extended his hand, a new sovereign shining in his palm, and Marjorie did the like. "He gave us these."

"I don't like your accepting tips from strangers," said Mr Crotchett, uneasily.

"This one was different," said Marjorie. "Besides, he made us shut our eyes."

"He gave the quids to us so that we could recognise the King by his portrait," said George.

"Why did you want to recognise the King?"

The children were silent. They would not reveal the reason of their expedition, because it had failed.

"Well, well," said Mr Crotchett, regarding them thoughtfully. "So you think if I really made up my mind, I could do what I now believe I can't do?"

"It seems frightfully difficult," said George.

"Your friend the mysterious horseman," pursued his father, abstractedly, "was no doubt right in theory. So many things are right in theory. You see this isn't a case in which the thing I want to do depends upon my ability—for I believe I could do it—but upon opportunity and time, which are not in my power. I may make up my mind till I'm black in the face: but I still have to go to the office from nine to six, or even (as the poet says) later."

The children regarded their perplexed parent with concern.

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"I suppose you *must* go to the office?" said Marjorie.

"Must is the word," said Mr Crotchett, cheerfully.

"Well, but," said George, "you are coming away with us for a holiday first. You are, aren't you?" he pleaded. "It won't cost anything. I can pay my own expenses." He gazed wistfully upon the image and superscription of his Sovereign.

"So can I," said Marjorie, eagerly.

"My dears," said Mr Crotchett, "you will do no such thing. You will buy what you like. That's what money is for, when you come to think of it. Nothing is more delightful than to pretend you are rich, even for five minutes."

The children wore an expression of mingled disappointment and relief.

"Well, you are coming, anyway," said Marjorie.

Mr Crotchett regarded them in silence.

"You shall decide," he said, presently. "I'll tell you the whole affair. After all, it's more your business than mine. You see, last night," he paused.

"Or was it this morning? Well, whenever it was, I thought I wasn't going back to the office any more. I was so pleased for the moment (of course that was wrong) that I forgot I shouldn't have any more money."

"That doesn't matter," said Marjorie, cheerfully.

"So I thought for the moment, because," said her father, impressively, "because, I fancied I saw another way of earning it. I woke with a lovely, a splendid story, in my head, all ready to be written down. It must have come to me in the night."

George and Marjorie, very attentive, nodded solemnly.

"It was the kind of story I've always said you shouldn't read—for fear of wasting your time," continued Mr Crotchett.

"It's splendid," said Marjorie.

"It's true," said George.

"You really think so? Well—that's not the point. The point is, that I found I had to go back to the office after all. To get money. You see, I don't know that anyone would buy that story of mine, or any other. Whereas the office is a certainty. So of course I had to go back. That's the whole thing. But——" Mr Crotchett clutched his hair. "But—since you have talked to me, my dears, I see a forlorn hope."

The children looked at him in breathless suspense.

"That is, that I should stay at home and finish the story while you are away. It would be hard for you. But it might be worth while. At the best, it might be a beginning. At the worst—I should have done something for once in my life. What do you think?"

"Forlorn hope," said George, promptly.

"Yes," said Marjorie. "Do, *do* a forlorn hope."

"Very well," said Mr Crotchett, "I will. Mind," he added, "I expect nothing, and you must expect nothing."

"Have you got pens and paper—and pencils and india-rubber—and blotting-paper—and sealing-wax and lots of ink?" asked Marjorie practically.

"No, I don't think so—any old thing will do," said Mr Crotchett, dreamily.

Marjorie pulled George by the sleeve, and they went out of the room. That evening, after the two children had departed with their Aunt, a large parcel arrived. It contained a couple of reams of best superfine cream-laid manuscript paper, a quire of pink blotting-paper, a sheaf of quill pens, a gallon of ink, a box of sealing-wax, a square of india-rubber, an oblong ink-eraser, a penknife, and a capacious glass inkstand.

"Bless the children," said Mr Crotchett.

He sat down alone in the gaslight, and surveyed his noble apparatus with a misty vision.

Then he began to write again.

## VIII

### MR SCREWBYP MEETS THE UNEXPECTED

WHEN Mary Grey left the house of Crotchett, she thought: "The first attempt at rescue is defeated."

Then she reflected upon the situation. It was evident that Mr Screwby had reinstated Mr Crotchett. But what had induced Mr Crotchett to change his mind? Why had he cancelled the arrangement with herself, and that without even seeing her? Miss Grey suspected her crafty Uncle Jonas of having somehow managed both to keep his clerk and to defeat his niece's plan. Charles Crotchett was not in a position to make terms with his employer. He would be forced to accept what conditions his employer offered; for the alternative was penury and probably ruin. Those conditions, then, must have been that Mr Crotchett would cancel his arrangement with herself. And Mr Screwby evidently reckoned that she would then return to his house and that things would go on as usual.

"Never," said Mary Grey.

Then the question was: What to do next? Obviously, to find a lodging. Afterwards, to find employment. The prospect inspired her with an agreeable excitement. For the first time in her

life she was to taste the real things of life. Hitherto, everything she wanted (except freedom) had arrived, as if by the operation of a natural law. She had lain soft, dressed sumptuously, and eaten luxuriously all her days. These things were so; she had never found a satisfactory answer to the question why they were so. Now she had grasped at freedom, and the other elements at once seemed to dissolve and vanish. However, Mary reflected, she had enough money of her own to secure her from want; and it was a comfortable reflection.

Being a sensible person, she did not wander about looking for lodgings. Among the well-to-do ladies, whose husbands or fathers were something opulent in the City, with whom Miss Grey had a visiting acquaintance, Miss Grey had heard much philanthropic chatter concerning the difficulties of working women in finding any place in which to live, which was not both squalid and costly. She knew there were such establishments as hostels for women, and she knew where they were.

Having engaged a room in an hotel, she went to Mr Screwby's house, packed some of her possessions, gave instructions to an agitated maid concerning the rest, and left her address. Her uncle, she learned, had effected a strategic retreat to his club, pending her return; and the servants had all given notice.

"We shall all be the better for a change," said Mary, cheerfully; and so departed.

That evening Mr Screwby came to see her. She received him in the common dining-room, an austere

apartment furnished with photographs of the pictures of Botticelli and high-backed oak chairs which brought art into the home.

"And when are you coming back, my dear?" said Uncle Jonas. "By the way, thank you for those flowers. It was a kind thought. It showed me that there was no ill-feeling between us. Ill-feeling is always such a mistake. Never does any good in business—never."

"I'm afraid I'm not coming back," said Mary, plainly.

"Come, come," said Mr Screwby, "let's discuss the matter as a business matter. You went away because I dismissed a clerk. That was your reason. Well, I've put him back again. Therefore your reason no longer exists."

"My reason had nothing to do with Mr Crotchett."

"Then why did you say it had?" cried Mr Screwby, with a touch of exasperation. "But I know what it is. You want to live your own life. Rights of women, and all that. It's a craze—nothing but a fashionable craze."

"Well, and don't you want to live your own life?" asked Mary.

"I tell you what it is," said Uncle Jonas, with energy, "my life, which you talk of, ain't worth a year's purchase left all alone among those servants of yours, Mary. You don't seem to understand the situation. Why, they actually expected me to order the dinner, and when I refused, they all gave notice. Here am I obliged to live at the club, which



I hate. Talk of your duty? A woman's duty is at home."

"I'll get you a good housekeeper, if you like."

"Rob me right and left," said Mr Screwby, bitterly. "I know 'em. Stout party in black silk, Scotch accent, orders you about. Can't call your soul your own. Besides, I'm thinking of retiring from business. . . . We might travel together a bit, and see the world," suggested Mr Screwby.

Mary shook her head. "It is very kind of you," she said, gently, "but you don't understand."

"No, I'm dashed if I do," said Uncle Jonas. "Well, if you won't, you won't. I didn't expect it, 'pon my word I didn't. The only relation I've got left, and she deserts me." He looked at her under his heavy lids. "What are you going to do?" he asked, suspiciously.

"I don't know yet," said Mary.

"Hah," said Uncle Jonas, apparently relieved. "You'll find," he went on, "that you can't do anything. You've had no training. You've never learned anything useful. You've never had occasion. What do you suppose you could earn? A pound a week? There's hundreds of young women with training and qualifications as can't earn that. And mind you, my dear, you can stop away if you like, of course, but your allowance stops."

"Of course," said Mary. "I've a little of my own, you know."

"Little it is, as you'll find," said Mr Screwby. "No one can say I haven't tried to meet you

half-way," he added. "There's some would have threatened to cut you out of their wills, like you read of in the papers. I haven't done that."

Mary remained silent.

"And as I say," went on Uncle Jonas, a little discomfited, "there's no ill-feeling."

"None," said Mary, with a smile, "we shall be good friends. We haven't been friends before, you know."

Mr Screwby looked at her as if the idea was new to him.

"I shall have to think what to do," he said, slowly. "Think what to do. But friends—certainly, my dear. I hope I can"—he paused—"make allowances. Well, my dear, I had a confounded bad night last night, and I must go and try to get a little rest."

And with that he went away. He had never expected defeat; yet he was defeated, badly; and he knew it. But he did not know how near he had been to success. Mary Grey had been nearly persuaded that she was behaving selfishly, and that her duty was to return and minister to the comforts of Uncle Jonas. But not quite. Uncle Jonas was pacific enough now. But why? Because she had met him boldly. The old habitual Uncle Jonas, pompous, irritable, exacting, and inexpressibly dull, was there all the time; and did she yield to a show of reason, the old habitual Uncle Jonas would return to stay.

So Mary hardened her heart, and went to bed and slept soundly, and awoke to a new day, full of

vigour, and went gaily out to look for employment. You may see such persons as Mary, looking for employment, in the vestibule of any newspaper office, any day.

In the stone hall, a comely figure is bending over the advertisement pages of the newspaper, tracing the lines with a delicate finger. The great doors of scrolled ironwork stand open; past them flow the crowd of a London pavement, and the thunder of the traffic; and beyond the packed turmoil, a piece of bright sky shines where the river runs under the bridge. The figure is always there. It varies; but there is always a figure, and its face is always anxious.

Mary preserved her beautiful serene composure, although, writing daily twenty letters, she received not a single reply; until, after a few days, she began to run short of money. Her dividends were due, but they did not arrive. Mr Screwby, who was her trustee, always gave her a cheque punctually. But no cheque came. Mary wrote to her uncle; but like the rest of her letters, it brought no answer. She began to recognise, in the reflection of her face in the glass, the expression of some of her friends in the hostel: the corners of the mouth a little pinched; fine lines upon the forehead; a slight puckering of the eyelids.

## IX

### THE FORLORN HOPE

THERE was one thing Mr Crotchett had done in his life: he had read. He was always reading. He read in the train, he read while he was eating his dinner, he read when the children had gone to bed in the evening. He kept a book in his pocket. Before that squalid and alluring bazaar was demolished, he was a haunter of Holywell Street. He would go without food to buy a book from one of those enchanting booths. He read without plan, and enormously. He read what he liked, nor ever laboured through a volume because some literary person said it was essential to culture. He perused lists of the best books compiled by various superior persons, and perceived with surprise that he did not want to read them. The classifications and categories so ingeniously invented by the scholar-pedant inspired him with distaste. Why was it necessary that everyone who wrote should belong to what was called a "school"? Why was it never possible that anyone should write anything without being "influenced" by someone else? Why were certain authors labelled Masters, when their works were obviously dull? And why was

not a harmless gentleman permitted to read without being worried by a tedious preface and harassed by an apparatus of imbecile notes ?

Although Mr Crotchett's soul mutely revolted against these things, he believed that the defect lay in himself, and that he could never count himself a scholar. He was confirmed in this belief when, in reading a biography (a thing he seldom did, perceiving that a biography usually represented his hero according to a preconceived and wholly erroneous idea of what the public would like him to be) he lighted upon the list of works which the hero had read before the age of twelve years, such as : the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, Burton's "Anatomy," Hakluyt's "Voyages," Smithers's "Travels in Europe," Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire," Plutarch's "Lives," Dean Bullnose's "Comparative Religions of the World," and Ballyhooley's celebrated "Epic of the Lost Tribes." With these (to name but these) the youthful hero was always familiar. Familiar was the word. Mr Crotchett was privately convinced that the whole thing was apocryphal. Nevertheless, he felt that his own knowledge was sadly deficient in comparison. Evidently, he did not know the right things ; and if scholarship meant tying labels to the coffins of dead authors, scholarship would never be his.

Mr Crotchett never read newspapers. He found that he could acquire all the information he desired from the placards. If one placard did not betray the secret, another (for such is commercial rivalry)

did ; and Crotchett often wondered why people should be expected to pay a penny for information gratuitously given by the very advertisement whose object was to extract that penny in return for that information. But he occasionally indulged himself in one particular weekly journal, because he found in it a kindred soul. It was clear that the editor of that paper was a powerful hater of pedants. He fell with might and main upon the pompous dullard ; who was drenched with ridicule and afterwards beaten about the head with a hammer. But for aspiring talent, for quality that touched the heart and brains of a man, that editor alone (it seemed) among mortal men, had a vivid and an assured appreciation. Alone among editors, he appeared to produce his journal without first making in his own mind a graven image of what he (wrongly) conceived to be his public, and then fitting his paper upon it like a suit of clothes. Charles Crotchett felt that if he could ever contribute something to that journal, he would die content.

Why, then, did he not try his luck ? For the simple reason that nine or ten hours daily in the City killed his ability. When the brain is put to a certain task day after day, the channel of thought sets in a particular direction ; fatigue follows ; and then it is impossible to divert the stream into another channel. The feat has been achieved by men of stronger will and stronger brain than Charles Crotchett ; but not often. Commerce eats up brains as well as lives ; therefore is England what England is.

But when Charles was suddenly released (as he thought) from the mill, the shock diverted what the scientific people call the stream of consciousness to another outlet. Then he sat down and wrote. Then was unlocked the store of words and images, the honey which for years he had been storing in the cells of his brain. Perhaps, had he never seen that weekly journal, even then he would have lacked courage; but he was fortified by the knowledge that there was one man at least, a man of power, speaking as one having authority, who was perfectly certain that the things which Charles admired, were admirable.

So Charles Crotchett sat down alone in his house and wrote; and what he wrote seemed good to him. For a week he laboured, never leaving the house; and then he had done. For good or ill, he had done. It might be true, as he had read, that he ought now to rewrite the whole work, once, twice or thrice; but he could not do it; for the simple reason that he knew of no way to make it better. That inability depressed him. He thought long on the problem, but could arrive at no solution.

While he wrote, the impulse had formed itself in his mind to send the manuscript to the editor of that weekly journal. The editor might even print the thing; if he would not accept it, he might at least advise the author what to do next. For, having done his work, the author was taken with a cold fit commingled of paralysing doubt and gloomy foreboding. He had learned in the City that it is

one thing to produce an article and quite another to sell it. And the success of the forlorn hope depended upon the sale. He entertained at this time no clear notion of the future. He told himself that of course at the end of his holiday he would return into slavery ; that his doom was cast ; that he was really very glad of it ; and that the writing was merely a rather delirious episode, good sport while it lasted. But it is probable that he did not really believe any of these things. His mind obstinately turned from their contemplation.

He wrote to the editor, enclosing the letter with the manuscript. He told the editor that time was of great moment to him : and left it at that. The next day he went into the country and wandered about feeling more like a lost dog than anything else in the world, helpless, without hope, without any definite emotion whatever.

The day following, knowing that there is no mental anodyne like reading, he spent the hours in reading. The next day, he felt suddenly so tired that he thought he was going to die ; and he dozed in his chair and read alternately ; awaking, with a leaping heart, at the postman's knock.

Next morning there was a letter beside his plate, directed in a small, strange handwriting. Charles opened it with tremulous deliberation. Within were three lines asking him to call upon the editor.

Hope deferred is an extremely agitating emotion. Charles thought at one moment that he would rather



go into action than face the editor ; the next, that his fortune was made ; and the next after, that he must prepare to receive sentence of death. He pictured the man as a lean, keen ascetic, strung to intensity, stern, despotic ; the while he waited in a dusky room, beside a bare oaken table ; and noted the etchings on the grey walls, the carpet and hangings of dim orange, the dull red hue of the woodwork, and inhaled the aroma of tobacco . . .

The door opened, and there stood a man of vast stature, his shoulders filling the opening. His great fair head was poised a little backward, as though the bright blue eyes were short-sighted. The grip of his hand was like a vice. A person more utterly different from his preconceived notion, Mr Crotchett could not imagine. This editor most resembled a viking come alive, with his fine mane of tawny hair and his red beard and broad ruddy visage.

“ You want my advice, Mr Crotchett ? Tell me about yourself.” The big man’s voice beguiled like the murmur of the waves of the sea. Charles unlocked his heart, and told all. Some subtle efflux of the other’s great-hearted sympathy inspired him.

“ Well,” said the editor, “ I will tell you this. You have the gift. You can write—excellently well. The stuff you were so kind as to send me ” —he laid a broad hand on Crotchett’s manuscript— “ is rightly conceived, admirably done.”

Crotchett felt himself turn hot all over. The

great man surveyed him with eyes which had a curious dancing quality, as though the grains of colour in them were actually in motion; and gave him a cigarette.

"But," continued the master, "*but* . . . the commercial side falls to be considered. Bread and cheese. You are not what is called a popular writer—not now. You have a position to attain—it is not yet attained. And until it is attained, bread and cheese is to seek. Now as to the stuff itself: I would publish it, but I cannot publish a serial. It is of serial length. Again, it is too short for a novel of commerce, which is sold by the piece. It is (in a word) at this moment, unsaleable—perhaps the more unsaleable for its very excellence."

"You advise me, then, to—to give up," said Mr Crotchett, desperately.

"Not I. The question (I take it) is of bread and cheese. Father Adam's difficulty, when he fled the Garden. Have you ever thought of journalism? You have read, of course?"

"Always," said Charles. "But I don't pretend to be a scholar."

"Scholarship is not literature—or the other way about, if you please. . . . Well, one must consider. In the meantime, I understand, there is the shop?"

"On Monday," said Charles.

"Ah," said the other. "Well—you have a talent. Guard it. It is the light in the prison. Come and see me again."

Charles found himself in the common daylight

of the street, his parcel of manuscript in his hand, at once uplifted and stricken. He was something instead of nothing. He could make something of value. But the great market was closed to him. For a moment the door had opened, upon a dazzling prospect; then it had shut. Now he was on his way to prison. As he walked, the real position emerged. The forlorn hope had failed, as it was bound to fail. And every step he took was a step nearer to the prison gates. The thought affected him with physical nausea.

And with hardly less distaste did he look back upon the past fortnight. It was of a piece with the rest of his life; a failure; the pursuit of a wandering fancy, instead of a grapple with reality; and as usual, fancy had led him nowhither. How much better to have gone away with the children and played with them at the seaside. He had robbed them of pleasure, for nothing. He could not make it up to them, because nothing lost in this world can be made up.

These reflections were extremely painful to Mr Crotchett. He endured his suffering with resolution. By degrees the pain lessened. When he entered the schoolroom, the sight of paper and pens and apparatus, the children's gift, gave him an acute pang; but it passed. In fifty years he had learned patience. The memories of the last fortnight he put altogether away from him. Dreams all, they were done and dead. After all, he was no worse off than he had been: except that he had lost Mary Grey. But perhaps somehow she would return.

Moreover, he had at least accomplished something, though it should never see the light. And he had met the great editor face to face; and the master had praised him. Back, then, to the mill with a stout heart.

## X

### DOWN AND OUT

MR CROTCHETT was due at the office early on Monday morning ; his sister and the two children were to return during the day, so that he would find them at home when he came back in the evening, as usual. "It was all to be as usual, now," thought Mr Crotchett, brushing his lustreless hat. As usual. Such is life.

It was raining, on the chill wings of east wind ; the clouds drooped upon the coldly shining roofs ; the streets were liquid mud ; the haggard houses seemed to shrink together upon themselves, like the poor sodden wretches huddling in doorways. Mr Crotchett remembered that there were holes in his boots and that he was condemned to suffer cold in his feet all day. As usual, Mr Crotchett had no umbrella, because he had lost it. He always lost umbrellas. So he sat upon the top of an omnibus and tried to think that the fresh air was bracing and healthful. There kept forming in his mind an uncomfortable picture of himself entering the office, pushing open the dingy door into the counting-house, greeting his fellows, all of whom, as he knew, regarded him with a slightly contemptuous

pity as an oddity, hanging his coat and hat on his peg, sitting down upon the stool with the infirm leg at the dusty desk, before the stained pad of blotting-paper and the squalid, untidy bundles of papers, in front of the same stain upon the discoloured wall, breathing the same close air redolent of damp garments, ancient dust, old ledgers and ink.

The picture was accompanied by an odd, uneasy reflection that the man who was about to do these things could not be the real Charles Crotchett; followed by an unreasonable fear lest he should by some sudden disaster be prevented from doing them. He might be run over, or taken ill, or lose his reason. The apprehension passed, to be succeeded by a deadly certainty that he, Charles Crotchett, was about to do and suffer these very things (as usual) which he had hated for so long.

He descended from the omnibus at the usual corner, struggled through the throng jostling on the pavements, and presently observed a thicker knot of people clustered outside the Screwby premises. Something seemed to interest them, something posted on the window. Mr Crotchett pushed his way through the crowd, towards a melancholy piece of paper pasted on the window. The rain had caused the ink of the inscription written on the notice to smear, as though it wept inky tears.

“Messrs Screwby, Gritten, Pooley & Booch regret to announce that they have been obliged to suspend payment—” Thus far read Mr Crotchett. He stood as one paralysed, staring at the fatal placard. People pushed against him,

paused to read, and went on their way. Presently Mr Crotchett dully observed that the place was closed. The door was locked.

Then he was aware of a sensation as of a sudden void in his inside ; he turned cold and sick, and then he became suddenly hot all over. For a moment his head reeled, and he thought, this is how people faint. He moved to the wall, and leaned against the lintel of the familiar entrance, trying to appear unconcerned. The faintness left him, and he turned to walk blindly homewards.

This was the knock-out blow and no mistake, he thought. He was down and out. And when he remembered how he had dreaded the return to paid work, he could have laughed aloud. Had he known of the alternative, he would have come singing. No man who has not been actually deprived of every source of income whatsoever can quite understand the staggering force of the shock. It seemed to Charles, ploughing along the busy pavements, that he alone among mankind was thus stricken ; and then it appeared to him as nothing less than a miracle that the people hurrying about him all seemed to have money and a livelihood. How was it done ? A wild desire seized him to do something instantly ; for how could he afford, penniless as he was, to lose a moment ? Ought he not to turn back at once, and there and then ransack the City for employment ? He stopped to consider the impulse. No : he was not in a condition to make a good impression ; moreover, he must go equipped with testimonials ; he must have time to arrange his

qualifications to the best advantage. And he went forward again. The thought of the children coming joyfully home from their holiday choked him.

He climbed the steps leading to his front door, like an old man. He reflected grimly that he had no right to a house at all, and that it would not be long before he must leave it. Well, he would sit down and rest, for he was very tired, and think out what to do.

The door opened, and he stood face to face with Mary Grey. In that moment, Mr Crotchett felt that he ought to have known she would be there, but had unaccountably forgotten. He knew what she was going to say, and she said it accurately.

"We were waiting for the sword to fall," she said.



## XI

### IN THIS TRANSITORY STATE

“ WE were only waiting for the sword to fall,” said Mary Grey.

Charles took her hand, and they went in.

“ Now that you have come——” said he, and could say no more.

“ We’ll see it through together,” said Mary.

She sat in the worn chair beside the fire, and Crotchett leaned against the mantelpiece, and gazed down at her, as though he could never look enough.

“ I’m ruined too,” said Mary. Her eyes narrowed as she looked up at him. “ I paid my bill this morning. I have nothing left. My uncle had my money in charge, and it is gone.”

“ Then you can stay here,” said Charles, with a sudden joy.

“ If you want me,” said Mary.

“ *Want* you ! ” said Charles.

She met his gaze steadily, and there was silence between them.

“ I saw Mr Screwby yesterday ” said Mary. “ He told me a long story about his business troubles, and how there was a conspiracy against him, and

so forth. I did not clearly understand it. He talks hopefully of a settlement. But I think the fact is that he is ruined."

She paused. Mr Crotchett shook his head.

"The curious thing is," she went on, "my uncle does not speak as though the disaster affected him personally. He has returned to his house, and talks of engaging a housekeeper and new servants. I don't understand it. Surely, if he is bankrupt, his creditors will take all his money."

"If they can get it," said Mr Crotchett. "There are ways and ways, in the City, by means of which people continue to wax fat on that which does not belong to them."

"Well, they're not our ways," said Mary, comfortably dismissing the topic. "Uncle Jonas has had his revenge! What are we to do next?"

When she said "we" Charles was conscious of a delightful thrill.

"What worries me chiefly," he said, drawing a chair to the hearth, "is the children. They'll come home happy and jolly, and then——"

"Tell them nothing," said Mary. "Leave them to me. I'm the new governess."

"How clever you are!" cried Charles. "Will you really manage them? How splendid!"

"Why, surely," said Mary.

"But we haven't any money, you know," said Charles, suddenly remembering the position. "I mean, literally, not any. We must face the facts."

"I know," said Mary. "It's very disagreeable."

But," she added, "here we are, just the same. It was money that parted us. Now we're together."

"I've thought of that," observed Charles, dreamily. "It reminds me what a curious thing it is how troubles exist only in the imagination of the future. Here we are, as you say; here is the house, just the same as usual. There is the smell of roast leg of mutton, cooking as gaily as if there were any money to pay for it—which there isn't. Of course, if we wanted to go to a theatre, or anything, we couldn't do it. But then we don't want to, as it happens."

"Just so," said Mary, "a person goes on being alive till he is dead."

"And *when* he's dead," said Charles, cheerfully, "I've no doubt he is surprised to find he isn't dead after all."

They sat down to dinner together, as happy as a pair of children playing truant. The sword was suspended above them, but it had not fallen; and swords or no swords, it is still true that man has no other possession than the present moment; so that the best he can do is to make the most of it.

That evening, after the children and their aunt had come home, an unwonted peace held the house. Mr Crotchett, leaving his sister's sitting-room, where he had been relating to her the course of events, opened the schoolroom door.

Mary Grey, with George on one side of her and Marjorie on the other, was standing before the dim picture hanging on the wall, in which the figures of knights in armour gleamed here and there. The

children were hearkening intently to her low discourse. Mr Crotchett stood where he was, listening likewise.

“So they came through the wild wood, overthwart and endlong, as the book says, to the castle, because they thought it was a place of peace, in which they might take refuge. And he who was a great clerk (so they called him because he was learned) had the gift of looking into the hearts of men; and he perceived that those in the castle bore always in their imaginations the picture of their enemies lurking in the wild wood, so that ever as they went about their business, digging and planting, baking and brewing, making of tapestry, the weaving of clothes, keeping the accounts of the tenants, and all the work of a great house, they had an eye to the great silent forest that spread like a green sea beyond the demesne, rising and falling away to the sky. They had little peace. But there were two children, a girl and a boy——”

“What were their names?” asked Marjorie, quickly.

“Who,” continued Mary, “knew so little of the people of the wild wood that they were not afraid of them, and so they were happy.

“But one day they awoke very early in the morning, so early that the sun had not yet lighted upon the wide lawns that lay between the castle and the forest. It was so still that not a leaf stirred. Against the bright sky beyond, the motionless trees of the forest looked as though they were wrought in metal. Suddenly the birds which were hopping and feeding upon the cool, grey lawn took flight together; and from out the wood there came a

long shining line of steel; armed men, and yet more armed men, pressing silently forward towards the castle. Then the children heard the great horn of the castle blow; and they ran down to the courtyard when the men were hurrying and arming, and down a little stair, and out by a door"—("A postern door," George put in)—"and away into the wild wood. They were not afraid, you see. But they knew the castle would need help, so they went to fetch——" the beguiling voice paused.

"I know!" said Marjorie. "To fetch the——"

"Hush," said Mary Grey. "The story stops there for to-night."

The children turned to their father, and went close to him.

"What about the Forlorn Hope?" they whispered.

"Finished," said Mr Crotchett. "Simply because I couldn't help writing on that magic paper you gave me with enchanted pens. So I did what I wanted to do, after all. So you must not be disappointed when I tell you that, at present, that is all. It is a great deal—it is more than you know—and it was your doing."

The children looked mystified.

"It can't be *all*," said Marjorie, decidedly.

"Will you read it to us?" asked George.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," said Mr Crotchett, hastily. "But perhaps Miss Grey will."

"On one condition," said Mary. "No one must ask any questions."

"Why not?" The children spoke together.

“You see,” said Mary, “there is a question before we have even begun. But I’ll answer it. Because there are some questions it is better not to ask. That is why no questions are allowed in fairyland.”

## XII

### AUNT ELIZA TAKES ACTION

FOR a week Mr Crotchett left the house and returned to it at his accustomed hour. The children thought he went to the office as usual. Indeed, he went to many offices, and to all in vain. No one in all the world wanted Charles Crotchett, the middle-aged clerk with grey hair. He had pitied the applicants for work whom he had been obliged to turn away from Mr Screwby's door. Now he knew how right he had been to pity them. In order to save money he walked everywhere, and the soles of his boots wore through, so that every day he thought would be their last, and still they continued to betray his poverty. For hours he sat waiting in dingy ante-rooms, jostled by errand-boys (luckier than himself) going in and out. Then followed the dismissal by a clerk, or a brief interview with the important, bald-headed person in the inner room, and dismissal by him. Once or twice he was offered temporary work in addressing envelopes; an offer which he refused, as its acceptance would have prevented him from seeking something better.

Every evening he returned muddy, weary and

white ; and every evening he was forced to reply to his sister's mute interrogation with a shake of the head. But Mary never interrogated him. She remained the same composed and serene creature, who quietly made the children perfectly happy. George and Marjorie learned with delight that they were not going back to school, at present, but that Miss Grey would teach them. George expressed his deliberate opinion that he would now have the chance of learning something, inasmuch as Miss Grey was the kind of person who understood a chap's difficulties, and who gave reasons to a chap ; which methods (George explained) were all a chap wanted of a teacher, who (he added) of course knew also how to make a chap work. Marjorie said it was heavenly.

Miss Crotchett said nothing, but she observed a good deal with her sharp old eyes. At the end of the week she said to her brother :

“ Charles, I have taken a situation.”

“ What ! ” cried Mr Crotchett, startled from the stupor of fatigue.

“ Please permit me to explain. I have made up my mind, and I feel I am right. Mary Grey is all to the children that—that I cannot be. Why should I be a burden upon you any longer ? I may not be clever,” said the old lady, stoutly, “ but I am capable and strong.”

“ But, my dear Lizzie——”

“ If you please, Charles. I have not done. I have secured an excellent post, with the assistance of Miss Grey, as lady housekeeper to her uncle.



To Mr Screwby," said Miss Crotchett, as though placidly defying anyone to deny that such a course was most natural.

Mr Crotchett preserving an astonished silence, his sister continued—

"You may well object, my dear Charles, that after the way in which you have been treated by Mr Screwby, such a proceeding may savour of the undignified. I have thought over the matter very carefully, and I beg to differ from you."

"But my dear Lizzie," expostulated Charles, clutching his hair, "I don't say anything of the kind. What I do say is that I cannot for an instant consent to his treating you in the same way. He would make your life a misery to you."

"I beg your pardon, Charles," replied Miss Crotchett, unmoved. "But I think not. Mr Screwby merely requires a little tact in one's management of him."

"I could never manage him," said Charles, bewildered.

"Quite so," said his sister, drily.

Charles was silent. It occurred to him, to his surprise, that his sister might possibly be right. "I should like to see Mr Screwby attempting any arbitrary methods (such as I have heard you describe) with *me*," said Miss Crotchett. "He must learn to leave his City manners in the City. But I anticipate nothing so disagreeable. At my interview with him to-day he was most courteous and considerate. Nothing would give him greater pleasure, he said, than to engage the services of

any relation to his old friend Charles Crotchett. And he added that sooner than live any longer at the mercy of a pack of idle hussies, he—but I cannot bring myself to repeat what he said," concluded Miss Crotchett.

Her brother regarded her with a dawning smile. His own experiences of his sister's methods of management were vivid in his mind.

"You ought to have been me and I you," said Charles. "Then there would have been no failure in the family."

"Don't talk nonsense, Charles."

"Well, there it is, my dear Lizzie. I can't even beg you to stay, for I can't even tell how long the landlord will let us stay in the house."

"That's my business," said his sister. "I shall have plenty of money. I shall pay the rent, at least."

"I won't hear of it," cried Charles. "If I cannot give you the home and the leisure which are your right, at least I won't live on your money. That would be the last degradation. Haven't I had enough already? After five-and-twenty years' work I am as much account in the City of London as the tattered wreckage drifting on the Embankment—an old shoe kicked about the gutters. I'm down and out, Lizzie. Save yourself."

"If I were a man, I should be ashamed to talk in that manner," observed Miss Crotchett, coolly.

"I beg your pardon, Lizzie. I won't do it again,"

said Charles. "You are the best of women. I haven't even thanked you."

"I dislike sentiment, as you know, Charles. Nor is there any occasion for it. As head of a London West End establishment, I really cannot see that I am to be pitied. Indeed, I feel that in some respects I am acting selfishly."

"And when—when do you go?" asked Charles, restlessly.

"As soon as I can make arrangements. In the meantime, I go over daily to see that things are in order; and I am engaging a new staff of servants: a task," said Miss Crotchett, with a sober relish, "demanding both a ripe experience and a nice discrimination."

"I almost believe that you actually like that sort of thing?" said Charles, in a tone of surprise.

"Of course I do," replied Miss Crotchett, briskly. "It is the first time that I have really had scope for such abilities as I possess. You must not blame me for taking a natural pleasure in my work. I am enjoying it immensely."

"It's like a dream," said Charles, staring at her abstractedly.

"It is curious that you should say that," replied his sister, with a face suddenly troubled and questioning. "I believe I must have dreamt something of the sort, for it keeps haunting me—only I can't remember what it was. But the strange part about the matter is that having had the dream—or whatever it was—seemed to give me confidence. I made up my mind to seek employment, I felt sure that I

should obtain it. And yet I'm not one to indulge in fancies."

"Well for you," said Charles.

He sat shrunken upon himself, his head bent, and stared into the ashes of the dying fire.

### XIII

#### THE LOST ARTIST

MR CROTCHETT, a man without hope, continued his walking from office to office in the City, through whose innumerable cells the river of gold ebbs and flows, and thousands stand hungrily looking at it ; but they cannot dip even a finger in the tide.

Upon a Wednesday forenoon, the editor who had so befriended Charles Crotchett with his hapless manuscript, sat immersed in the proofs of his paper, which was to be put to bed (as printers say) that evening. It was that editor's principle that his journal should be a work of art ; and the correction of proofs was the final touch of the poet's master-hand. He was a bold man indeed, reckless of life, cased in triple brass, compact of impudence and void of understanding, who dared to intrude his vile body into the Presence on Wednesday morning.

Therefore was the editor amazed when one knocked upon his sacred door.

"Go away!" shouted the Master.

"I'm St Just," said a voice without.

"Then," said the editor, "you ought to be ashamed of yourself." And he added a few ex-

planatory remarks which unfortunately cannot be set down in this place.

"I've just become editor of *The Afternoon Awakener*," said Mr St Just. "Now can I come in?"

"I'll give you ten minutes. Stay eleven," he thundered as a brisk young man entered smiling, "and I'll break you across my knee. Do you know that I would refuse admittance to the Archangel Gabriel, you scoundrel? Now tell me all about the new miracle."

"Happened at breakfast this morning," responded the elegant youth, placidly. "Belshazzar—you know Belshazzar, worth a thousand a minute, or words to that effect—leaned across the lobster salad, and said, 'I've just bought *The Afternoon Awakener*—will you edit it?' I said, 'Certainly.' 'Delighted,' says Belshazzar. 'Begin to-morrow, will you?' So I begin to-morrow. Never done such a thing in my life—and where's my staff? And I begin to-morrow. So I came to you."

"Naturally," said the Master. "What you want is men. Brains you have. You can write. You are a born journalist. Heaven aid you. I will find you the men, Billy."

"Of course you will. But," said Mr St Just, "I'll tell you something for your private ear. There's more behind. Much more, in fact. There's a Very Distinguished Personage behind."

"A Health unto His——"

"Silence, you brawling cavalier. I'm telling you a secret, and you bawl it to the housetops. Well,

you know His ambition—to revive the patronage of the arts. He can't do it all directly, of course. The great Belshazzar is the obsequious Instrument, sir. This morning I, even I, simple as I sit here, had the honour of a conversation with the Very Distinguished. He is an astonishing personage. He developed a theory of literature—or should we say journalism? No matter. He wants on the staff men who have not merely written, but lived—so long as they have lived, he thinks they can write.”

“Wrong,” said the Master. “The artist——”

“Not so fast. To be more precise, the discovery of men who really have the gift but who have never had the chance of using it, is desired. The view is that writers who are always in their study know not life, while the man out in the hurly-burly who has done and seen and suffered, sometimes owns a talent hid in a napkin.”

“Yes,” said the Master, thoughtfully. “Yes. Among the old men, yes. . . . Sir Walter the Borderer—the last of the classics. To go back, Sir John Mandeville, Bunyan, Raleigh, Villon, Cervantes—to name but these. . . . But among the moderns, how rare! Dickens, perhaps—but his genius removes him from rule and line. Herman Melville! Joseph Stanislaus, the noble Pole. . . . I see what you will say. You will tell me of Balzac, Hugo, Flaubert, Zola. I will have none of them. The realism of pure invention, all! Live? They never lived save in their own creating: themselves creatures of an insensate and an inordinate ambition,

to be as gods, creating good and evil—but chiefly evil.”

“I will take you on about that—I will try a fall with you, but not now,” returned St Just, calmly. “For the present, I perceive—never mind for what arrogant reasons of your own—you approve the idea.”

“Surely,” said the Master. “Surely, my friend. And when I have wiped the floor with you, upon a day, you shall mumble a contrite approval of my reasons out of a broken mouth. But surely. It is the eternal problem: how to wed art and life?”

“Well, then, produce the men,” quoth St Just. “Of writers, *pur sang*, you have a goodly company. But find me the man who has lived.”

“You haven’t done badly in that line yourself, Billy,” observed the Master. “But do you expect me to go out into the highways and hedges—but stay! I think I know a man.”

“Don’t tell me his name,” said St Just. “I will bet you that you have been forestalled. I will wager that I tell you of a man whom you never heard of, and yet you should know him. He has been discovered by Another.”

“By whom?”

“By him of whom I spoke.”

“Ha!” said the Master. “Has he been playing Haroun al Raschid? Hath he heard the chimes at midnight? This is heavy odds against a poor penster. But I will take you.”

He placed a sovereign on the table; St Just laid a sovereign beside it.



"Unbutton," commanded the Master.

St Just laid a piece of paper folded before the Master; who drew a letter from a drawer and placed it alongside the paper.

"Oblige me," said the Master, "by comparing each with the other." He stuck his thumbs in the armholes of his opened coat, and leaned back in his chair. "'Tis a thousand to one chance," he said, placidly. "Nay, a seven million to one hazard. The population of London—all save one. But you observe, Billy, observe, if you please, that with the price of a lunch quaking in the balance, no faintest wrinkle mars my azure brow. How different from yourself! You, sir, are the prey of an unseemly agitation. Your hand shakes—your lips tremble. I am ashamed for our common manhood."

St Just took the two papers, glanced at the letter, raised his eyebrows, and laughed. Then he pushed the two coins towards the Master.

"What!" cried the Master, his great face beaming like a sun. "What! You miserable penny journalist, you parasite of millionaires, you gilded jack-in-office, you pick-thank of good men's brains—you would try conclusions with *me*! Behold your fate."

"I give you best," said St Just. "But I'll live to see you burned for witchcraft."

"Dear child, we will lunch at Gian Roccabuoni's," said the Master. "Have I not the wherewithal?"

Preceded by Mr St Just's majestic bull-dog, who, himself, preceded by his teeth, rolled along like a sailor, the pair of editors took their way to the

famous restaurant, and seated themselves in their own particular corner, the great Signor Roccabuoni himself hovering courteously thereby. When the coffee was brought, and the incense of the long Dutch cigars rose above the buxom flask of Chianti, said the Master:

“And how did our Happy and Glorious discover the Unknown? The truth, if you please.”

“It seems,” replied St Just, “that he had gone a-roving on horseback, when he was moved by the sight of a small damsel in distress. She had come to see the King, and when no King was to be seen, she wept. There was a young brother, also. They told their tale; and from their artless story, the Eminent Intelligence evolved the figure of the Lost Artist.”

“Did the children know to whom they spoke?”

“I should say not.”

“Then the Distinguished Patron evolved out of his august consciousness the Lost Artist. He never saw him?”

“Dear me, no,” said St Just.

“Well, you see, I *have* seen him,” said the Master. “And now, Billy, you will proceed to take your orders. The back of the menu—your gold pencil. So.”

“To hear,” said St Just, “is to obey.”

## XIV

### HARD PRESSED

THE shadow of separation brooded over the house of Crotchett. On the morrow, Aunt Eliza was to remove herself and her boxes to the Screwby mansion; and with her was going Mary Grey. For Mary had capitulated. There was no help for it. Only Miss Crotchett's advance of salary kept the household going, by means of the payment of small immediate items. Debts were darkly increasing. Mr Crotchett had secretly pawned his dress clothes, and had bought a new pair of boots with the proceeds. Every evening Charles came home more weary from his hopeless quest for work. Mary determined that something must be done to relieve the garrison.

She went to Uncle Jonas; reminded him that her little fortune had disappeared while in his keeping; and asked him what he proposed to do. Mr Screwby, not without an attempt at pathos, offered to continue to pay her the interest upon her capital; but he stipulated that she should return to his house. She might (he said) do exactly as she chose; and as she seemed to dislike domestic duties, he had

engaged a competent housekeeper upon her recommendation. And Mr Screwby delicately insinuated that in order that she might feel wholly at liberty and under no obligation to him, a nominal sum (say a couple of pounds a week or so) should be deducted from her income to pay for her board and lodging. Mary, who wanted to buy some new clothes for the children, promptly cut down the tariff by one half; or, as Mr Screwby preferred to call it, fifty per cent. Having explained to his own satisfaction that he was conferring an extraordinary favour upon her, he gave way. It did not occur to Mary that her presence in his house was worth something to Uncle Jonas, who was sensitive to the remarks upon him current in the City. He particularly objected to hearing that "his own niece would not live with him." His friends had quite enough to say concerning his business transactions, but these observations affected him less than reflections upon his domestic relations. For Uncle Jonas prided himself upon his rectitude in his private life, whose principles he kept carefully separate from the principles commonly accepted in the City.

So the shadow of approaching separation brooded over the house of Crotchett. Charles had suffered under the rule of his sister; but he was used to her sharp ways; and her departure was like the falling away of a part of his life. It was the beginning of a change whose end he feared. Nor did he find much consolation in the thought that as Mary Grey would

continue to care for the children, he would see her daily.

For in his lonely journeyings in the City, Charles had come to look upon her image in his mind as that which was most desirable in the world. She had come to his rescue like something divine, out of the unknown. The alluring fancy that she might have become something nearer; that as his wife she might have stayed with him always; he must sternly put away from him. The labyrinth of pitiless great buildings through which he toiled all day, reared its million tons of brick and stone between him and his desire. And when he returned at night, to see her sitting with the happy children, quiet and serene and kind, the knowledge of what might have been; the knowledge that, instead of that mocking likeness of home, so soon to vanish, it might have been the real thing; afflicted Charles sorely. If it were not for the children, he would have preferred her absence to a presence so desperately tantalising. A shyness fell between them; they spoke little to each other; and were seldom alone together. Never in his life had Charles Crotchett seen his way (as he expressed it) less clearly.

Mary Grey was in much the same case. For the first time in her life, she was dealing with the miserable details of poverty. She felt as though she were in an iron dungeon, full of sharp corners, in which she could not stand, sit or lie. She knew what it was to send out for a farthing's worth of lard.

She learned the extraordinary number of things one could buy for a shilling if one knew how. She began to understand the nature of the endless pitiless fight for existence waged by the poor; of whom millions were in much worse straits than herself. She became acquainted with the enslaving drudgery of household work, to which those are condemned who cannot afford to buy the appliances for lightening it, although they are most in need of them. She recognised a condition of affairs in which the breaking of a teacup is a tragedy, the burning of a saucepan a thing to keep one awake at night, the disappearance of a quarter of a pound of butter a catastrophe. These sordid affairs would matter little if there were any hope of better conditions; but when there was no such hope, what then?

Then there were the children. It was one thing to contemplate, in a glow of enthusiasm, the delight of making the two pleasant little people happy; of illuminating their minds; of caring for their welfare. It was quite another to be with them morning, noon and night. Mary did not understand why she became so exhausted in the process. She did not know that the constant care of young children is a business so exacting that no man will engage in it. He knows that he would break down under the strain. It is for this reason that, inspired by the instinct of self-preservation, every man will carefully explain that the care of children is a light and pleasing occupation especially congenial to

the delicate female constitution. It is for the same reason that schoolmasters, while they insist on having longer holidays than anyone else, still pose as over-worked objects of pity. Perhaps they are.

Mary came into the Crotchett household charged with a high endeavour. She found there what she had not foreseen. Here was no crisis, demanding spirited action, but a perpetual, obscure and hopeless conflict, and the draining of the energy of body and mind. Sooner or later, Mr Crotchett would probably find a means of making a bare livelihood; but even so, though the immediate stress would slacken, the main struggle would go on. She had a great affection for the gentle Charles, who had kept so brave a light burning within him through all his dusty days; but would that affection endure on the terms dictated by the lean, implacable devil of poverty? Mary doubted. She hated poverty. Use and wont can make tolerable almost any conditions; but use and wont were against her. Was it true, as she had often read, that love triumphantly abolished all difficulties? Mary doubted. Again, if that saying were true, it followed that she had not the real thing. Either way, her path was barred. These considerations had influenced her in arranging with Mr Screwby to return to her quarters in his house. Had she her own luxurious refuge to which she could retire at will, she could, she thought, continue to wear through each day as it came, no matter what it brought, and so continue. For she was determined to hold out.

Like a prudent general in face of heavy odds, she was about to effect a strategical retirement, but retreat she would not.

It seemed to Mary that evening when the shadow of separation brooded over them, that they were like people groping in a sultry mist, which deadened the senses, so that they could not even speak freely to one another. They could no more alter the circumstances which closed them in on every hand than people lost in a fog can dissipate it at will. And how many such people had fallen into deep places and been killed? or the ship in which they were coming home had been sunk in a few minutes.

A kind of terror seized her as she glanced about the quiet room. It was a warm, steamy night, and the window was open. The two children were seated at the table, busy with brushes and paper and water-colour. Opposite to them Charles Crotchett's grey head was bent over another of the scores of hopeless letters he wrote every evening, applying for employment. Miss Crotchett sat erect beside the ashy grate, knitting. What was about to happen to them all? thought Mary.

"I can't get it right," said Marjorie, despondently.

"What is it?" Mary leaned over the drawing.

"It's an illustration for Daddy's book, of course," said Marjorie. "You know. Where all the people in the castle crowded to the door to see who was coming."

"You must make it dark inside the hall, so



that it shows the sunlight outside," said George. "But I'm doing it from outside, so the doorway's black."

"It isn't that at all," said Marjorie. "They were all listening. How do you make people look as if they were listening?"

"Like this," said Mary. She stood in the shadow with upraised finger. "Hark!" she said.

They all turned to look at the vivid figure.

"What's that?" cried Miss Crotchett, suddenly.

They all listened intently. Footsteps sounded on the steps leading up to the front door, and the bell rang.

"Dear me," said Miss Crotchett, "it gave me quite a turn. It's only someone at the door, after all."

Mary stood still, a finger on her lip. Charles turned to his sister.

"What did you hear?"

"I—I don't know," replied Miss Crotchett, with a curious reluctance. "It was fancy. I daresay I am a little upset to-night."

"I thought I heard something too," said Charles, dreamily. He passed his hand over his weary eyes. "But I have heard it so often in imagination—and it has never come true—the magic horn"—his voice faltered and ceased.

The children looked from one to the other with wide eyes. Mary stood where she was, with so remarkable an expression upon her listening face that the children stared at her fascinated.

Isabel entered the room.

“For Master George and Miss Marjorie,” she said, and gave a large square envelope to each of the children.

So eager were they, that they did not notice that Mary Grey, turning white, shuddered slightly as she groped for her chair and sat down in the shadow.

## XV

### THE LETTERS

MARJORIE was the first to open her letter. There was a minute's silence while she perused its contents.

"Oh!" said Marjorie. She flushed deeply.

"'Tell your father,'" she read aloud, "'that help is coming

From

THE LONELY HORSEMAN.'"

"And mine is just the same!" shouted George.

The two children looked at one another. Their father, with a very white face, held out his hand for the letters. The paper shook in his hand as he studied it. Both letters were written in the same square black hand. Neither bore date nor signature nor address. Charles Crotchett gave them back to the children in silence.

"If you please, sir," said the voice of Isabel, who had remained unobserved in the room, "the messenger said I was to give you this when the young lady and gentleman had read theirs."

She laid another square envelope before Mr

Crotchett. He opened it like a man in his sleep. There was a breathing silence, everyone watching him intently while he read. Mary saw a red spot colour his cheek-bone, and something began to beat faintly in his sunken temples, like a pulse. She crossed the room and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Run away, children,” she said. “You shall come back in a minute. Quick!”

George and Marjorie rose instantly and went out, followed by Isabel. Miss Crotchett stood leaning a hand upon the table, her lips trembling.

“Read it,” said Charles. He covered his eyes with one hand. The other sought Mary’s hand, where it rested on his shoulder, found it, and stayed there.

“‘My dear Sir,’” Mary read aloud, “‘Your name and qualifications have been given to me by a common friend, whose recommendation is to me conclusive. I shall be much obliged if you will consider the following proposal, and will let me know your decision as soon as possible. If you will join the staff of this journal, it will give me great pleasure. The work would be on the literary side. The salary would be five hundred pounds (£500) per annum, at first. If you would be good enough to call and see me here to-morrow, we could arrange all details. In the meantime, you will I hope forgive me for having prepared the way by first addressing your son and daughter, especially when I tell you that the idea of so doing originated with our common friend aforesaid, who indeed roundly insisted upon my

carrying his fantastic notion into execution. He said the children had a right to be the first to tell you what I trust is welcome news ; and (knowing what I do) I am disposed to agree with him. Sincerely yours, Will. St Just.' ”

XVI

CHARLES CROTCHETT SEES HIS WAY

WHEN the two children, in a state of mingled awe and ecstasy, had gone to bed, Mr Crotchett said to Miss Crotchett,

“Of course you won't go away now, Lizzie.”

Said Miss Crotchett to Mr Crotchett,

“My dear Charles, of course I shall.”

“But why?”

“It would not be right to break an agreement,” said Miss Crotchett, with dignity. “You know that as well as I do. Besides, I have told you that I like the work.”

Charles was silent. Miss Crotchett glanced sharply from her brother to Mary Grey, who was sitting a little withdrawn, contemplating the point of her shoe.

“If you will excuse me,” said Miss Crotchett, “I have one or two little things to see to.”

The two were left alone. Mary Grey continued to study the point of her shoe. Charles looked at her timidly, and withdrew his eyes.

“And you,” said Charles, presently, “are going too?”

Mary said nothing.

"Of course," continued Charles, "I know your leaving is necessary. But do you think you could ever come back? I mean, to stay?"

"You mean, will I marry you?" said Mary, with a smile.

"Yes, that's what I really mean," said Charles, clutching his hair. "I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Need you?" asked Mary. "Hadn't we better put it off a little?"

"Oh," said Charles, discomfited. "Do you think so?"

"You see there's a good deal to consider," pursued Mary. "For one thing, I don't think—in fact I am sure—I would not have married you while you were really poor. It wouldn't have done at all. I couldn't stand it."

"Certainly not," said Charles.

"Well, then, things have changed. But one thing has not changed, and that is our friendship. Do not let us risk that, whatever we do. Marriage might spoil it—and then all would be over, because there would be nothing left. Do you see?"

"I see that," said Charles. "It is possible. It all depends on the person. I can only answer for myself. I've been married before, you know, and we were very happy," he added, simply. "When all that was ended, I thought everything was ended."

"And now?" said Mary.

"And now," Charles went on, "it is very difficult to explain. It is the same *I* that walks about under

my hat, and yet it is another. The *I* that is myself looks back on the self that *was*, the foolish person who made all sorts of silly mistakes, with a kind of pity, and wonders if the self that *is* will make a better hand of it. He ought to; for somehow or other he has gained a brave and beautiful companion. I mean you, my dear."

"Do you see your way clear, at last?" asked Mary.

"You are so extraordinarily sensible, my dear," said Charles, "and I have so entire a faith in you, that I am absolutely sure whatever you do will be right."

"Then," said Mary, "as the children say, *Let us see what it is coming into.*"

"They always think it is coming into something new and delightful," said Charles, dreamily. "And it always does. When they say, 'Open Sesame' the door always opens. They have the secret of magic, which some call faith. Do you remember—or was it a dream—or——"

"Yes," said Mary, quickly, "but it is better not to speak of it."

"Why?"

"I don't know why," said Mary. "I was told so, when I was a child."

"Who told you?"

Mary glanced out of the open window, and about the quiet room, and spoke low.

"The Fairy Man," she said.



## THE PASSING OF THE FAIRIES

I hear them cry as they pass,  
*Goodwill to lad and lass,*  
In voices joyful and shrill,  
Ere they vanish into the hill.

A bitter frost had bound the land,  
Glimmered the snow on either hand,  
The cope of heaven shone with stars.  
Low down, the blood-red sign of Mars  
Glittered above the lighted haze  
Of the far town's thousand-footed ways,  
Beyond the dark ridge of the hill  
Keeping his boding vigil still  
Unheeded.

But nearer hand, the kindly light  
Of cot and homestead glimmered bright  
Along the valley, amid the trees,  
Scattered upon the giant knees  
Of the hills about whose iron brow  
The great winds ever ebb and flow,  
The thunder crashes, sun and rain  
Follow in turn, and falls again  
Silence.

Under the hill,  
Cheery and shrill,

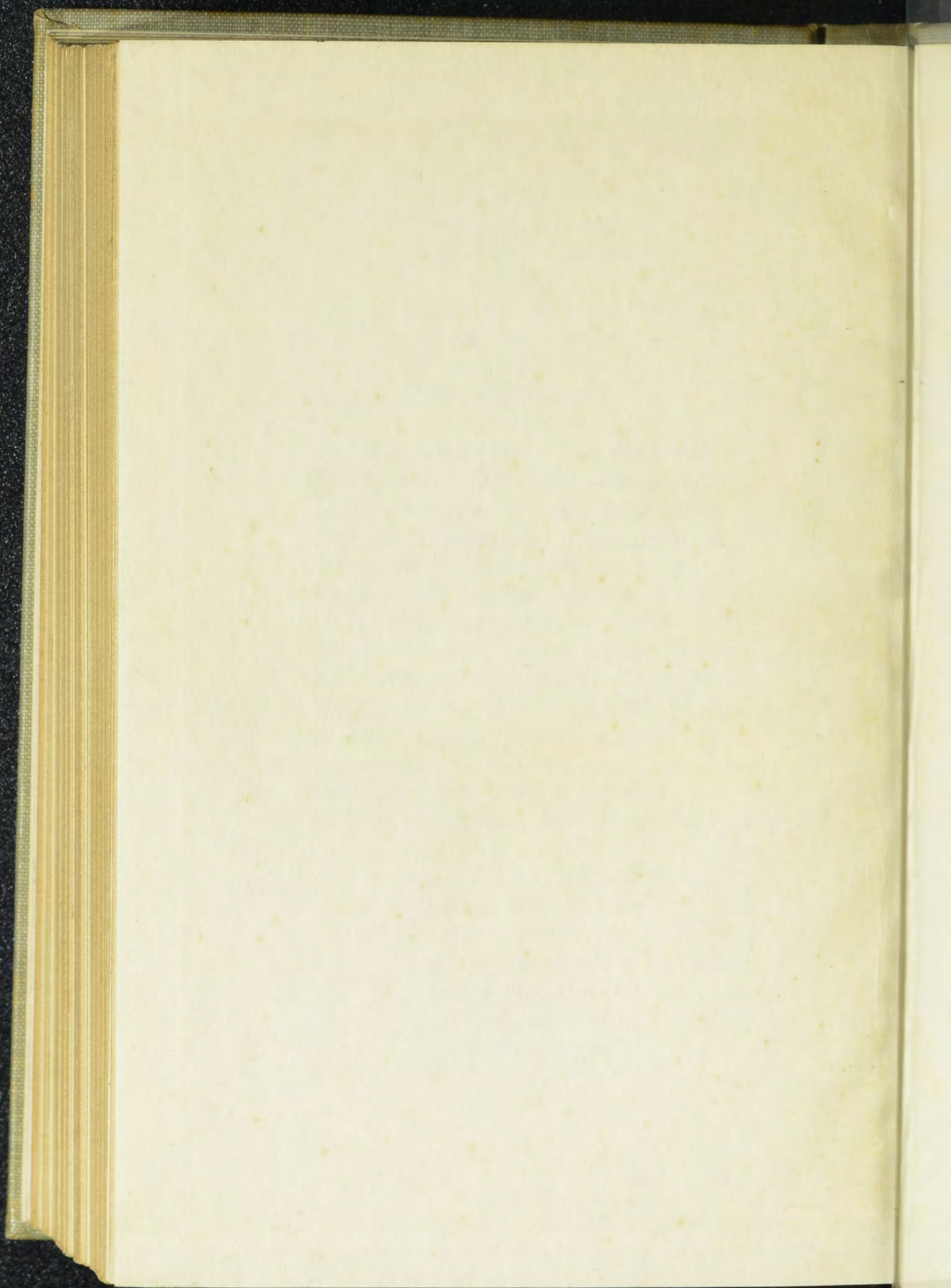
Hearken the elfin call :  
*Good luck, one and all !*  
*Good luck—Farewell !*

Far from the town they speed,  
Never, for utmost need,  
To enter the city—  
More's the pity. . . .

But still, where borrel folk are found,  
Far from the city's strife and sound,  
Making a garden of God's good earth,  
Friends of the seasons' changing birth,  
Strong in the dawn's eternal grace,  
Fired of the sun, and brave in the face  
Of the immemorial hills, and wise  
In the character of the mutable skies,  
The Little Good People still draw nigh,  
With flute and horn they'll still flit by,  
Crying a message kind and glad  
To wife and master, maid and lad,  
Calling a greeting out of the dark,  
As they march down the valley—hark, now hark !

Hear them cry as they pass,  
*Goodwill to lad and lass,*  
In voices joyful and shrill,  
Ere they vanish into the hill.  
Hearken the elfin call :  
*Good luck, one and all !*  
*Good luck—Farewell !*

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