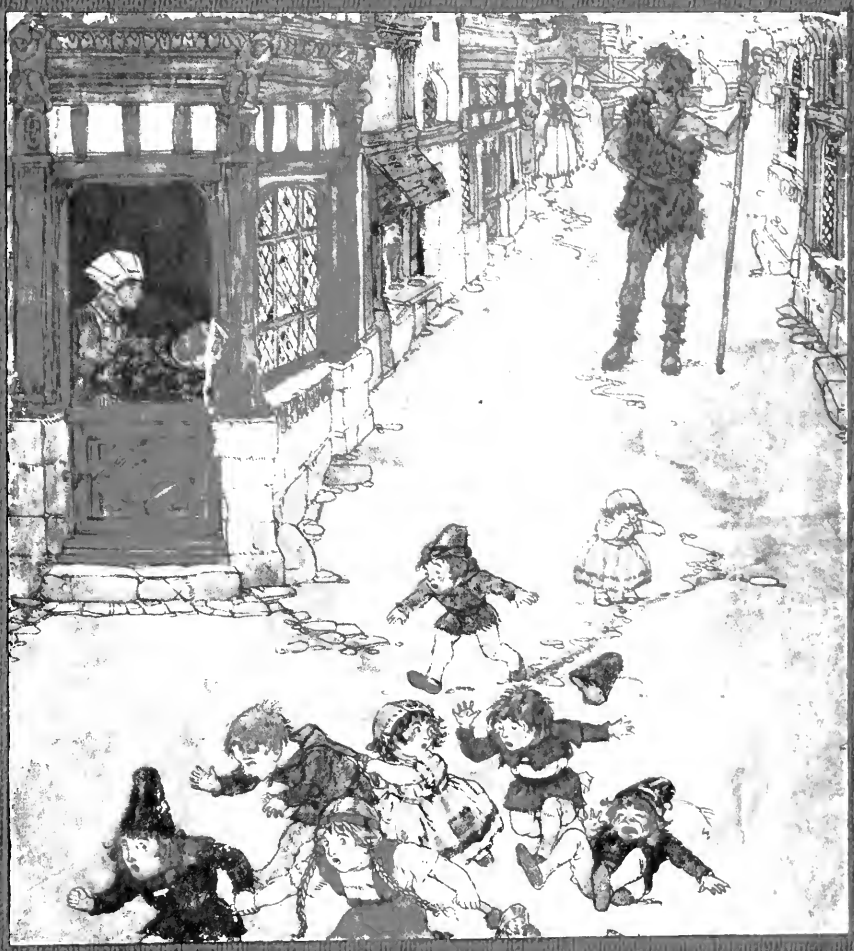
GRANDMOTHER'S FAIRY TALES



GRANDMOTHER'S FAIRY TALES

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The curious glances of the passers-by made him feel uncomfortable

GRANDMOTHER'S FAIRY TALES

FROM THE FRENCH OF CHARLES ROBERT-DUMAS

BY PIA HEWLETT

ILLUSTRATED BY MAURICE LALAU

LONDON : WILLIAM HEINEMANN
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ILLUSTRATIONS

JACK BRUIN

JACK BRUIN

I

ONCE upon a time there lived a wood-cutter and a wood-cutter's wife, who were very unhappy because they had no children.

The husband would say :

" Wife, although we are as poor as Job, holy man, and although we don't always have enough to eat, I am sure I should slip in the axe all the faster for having a baby in our hut to dandle on my knees of an evening. He would laugh up into my face, pull my beard, and I should be able to put just ten times as much heart into my work to see him so happy."

And his wife would answer :

" Husband, if we had a baby, why, just for love of him I would go and cut the fine withies on the banks of the stream and I'd make baskets of them and take them to the town to sell. I should bustle along the

roads : ' Baskets, white wicker baskets ! Who'll buy, who'll buy ? Fine baskets, pretty ones ! ' And I'm sure I should be able to make up a rhyme to sing, all about the basket-makers, and the little streams and the withy beds and the pruning-knives. And then, when the fine ladies and housewives heard me, they'd open their windows, and when they saw me so anxious to sell and my wares just asking to be bought, they'd come down : ' How much are your baskets, my good woman ? ' And so I'd go from the busy streets to the squares and from alley to avenue, and my stock would be getting less and less. And then, when I came back with my earnings I'd buy some wool and some flax and I'd sit at the wheel and spin clothes for our little one.''

Then they would look at one another and say no more, but their deep sighs told more than hundreds of words. And every evening before they went to sleep they prayed to God to grant their one desire.

Now one day when the wood-cutter's wife was crossing a clearing in the thickest part of the forest, she saw a she-bear playing with its cubs in the hollow of a rock.

She was terrified at the sight ; she dropped her bundle of wood and fled as fast as her legs would carry her. But after running for some time and hearing no noise behind her, she was convinced that nothing was after her, and stopped. Being a woman, and therefore inquisitive, she peeped through the branches to see what the creature was doing. The she-bear had taken one of her cubs between her great paws and was licking it gently and fondling its head and nose, while her other cubs were floundering clumsily round her on the moss.

'' Ah me ! '' thought the wood-cutter's wife, when she saw the gambols of the happy litter, '' why haven't I a baby to fondle like that she-bear ? Oh ! how I should like one ! even if it were as furry as the furriest of those cubs ! ''

She went her way thoughtfully, leaving her bundle, which she didn't dare to go back for.

A year passed by, and at the end of it the wood-cutter's wife gave birth to a son. But you can imagine her trouble when she first looked on her new-born baby. His body was completely covered with long fur which was just like a bear's pelt ! Then the poor woman remembered

her fond wish, and with many tears she told her husband about what she had seen.

"Never mind, wife," he answered; "we must take our child as Heaven sends him. Fur or no fur, he is ours, and we shall love him so much that we'll soon forget the colour of his coat."

Then, lifting up the child in his arms:

"Here you are, my chick," he went on, "howling and kicking and all alive. You are very welcome, and as I must call you something, I shall give you the name of the animal you take after most. Jack Bruin shall be your name; and may you one day be as strong as your godfather the bear: you'll be the best wood-cutter in the country-side."

Much cheered by this gay speech, the wife smiled through her tears. But alas! the good people's joy did not last long, for no sooner was Jack put into his swaddling-clothes than he began to tear them, scratching with his feet and hands and howling at the top of his voice. His mother wanted to give him the breast to keep him good, but he bit her cruelly, for he had been born with his mouth full of teeth as sharp as needles. The good woman was horrified and cried out aloud: she got up and tried to get rid of her terrible nursling, but he clung on to her, flinging himself at her, scratching and biting her and hurting her dreadfully. The father was forced to interfere to make his son leave go, but even in doing this he got several nasty bites.

The poor creatures looked at one another in despair, not knowing what to do next, while Jack Bruin was carrying on like a young devil in his cradle, breaking the wicker sides with his heels and fists and tearing the sheets and blankets to pieces. They agreed that they could not keep him at home, and asked one another distractedly what they were going to do with him.

"Alas!" said the wife, "you couldn't have the heart to kill him. Even if he's as bad as the devil he is our son."

"Oh, well!" answered the wood-cutter; "of course if you'd rather see him die of hunger before your very eyes, because you can't feed him——"

At last they decided to leave him in the forest.

The wood-cutter went off, carrying his new-born son on his back.

He had been obliged to put him in a sack to protect himself from his claws. The mother's cries were so loud and piercing that they could be heard for at least a hundred paces round the hut.

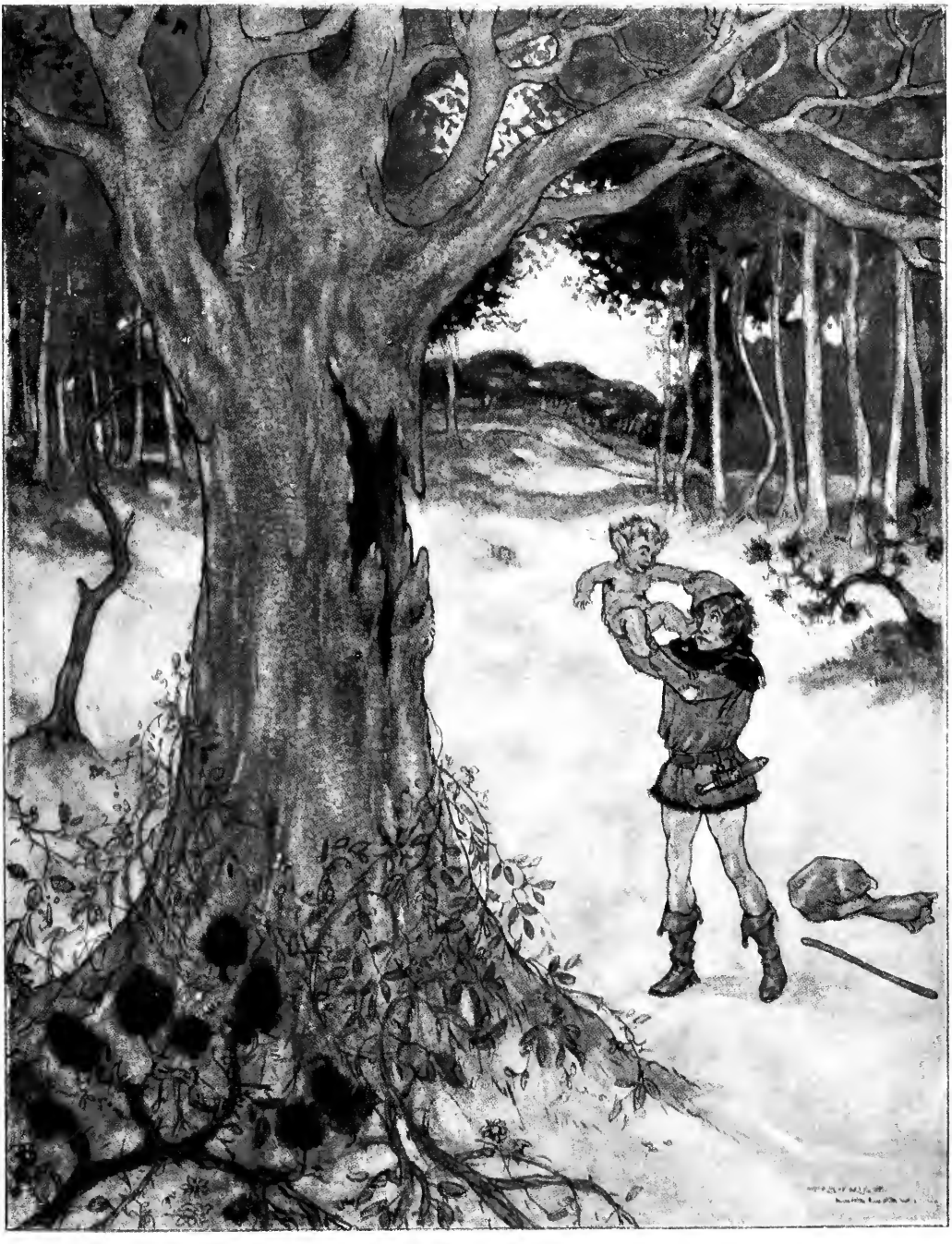
He went to the thickest part of the forest, and, having come quite close to the bear's den, he stopped before a big oak tree whose trunk

had been hollowed out by lightning. He took Jack out of the bag and put him into the hollow of the tree, and then ran away, weeping, without looking back.

II

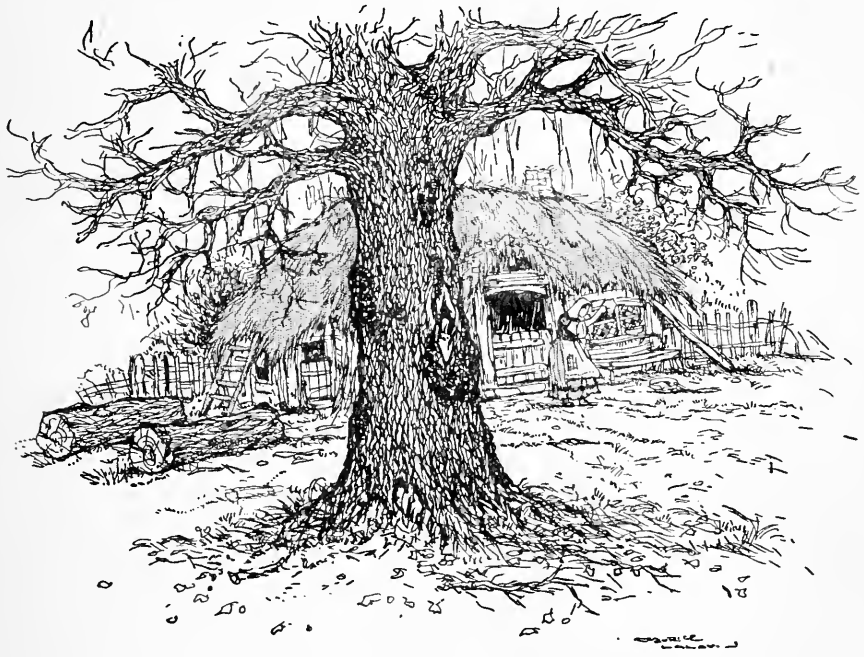
A SHORT time after the good fellow had gone, the very same she-bear that the wood-cutter's wife had seen lying before her lair the year before happened to pass near by. She heard the child's cries, went up to it, stuck her nose into the hollow of the

He stopped before a big oak



oak-tree, and, deceived by Jack's strange appearance, and thinking he was one of her cubs that had got lost, she took him up gently by the scruff of his neck and carried him to her den, where she fed him with her milk.

The child took very kindly to this new life ; he spent long hours



hanging to his sturdy foster-mother's teats, only leaving go to retire to the corner of the cave and sleep the heavy sleep of a young animal full of food.

At three months old he was so strong that he could already get the better of his young brothers the cubs, if they happened to dispute his place at their mother's side.

During the warm summer afternoons he would play with them on the moss in the clearing, trying the strength of his fists and the firmness of his ankles.

In the autumn he made his first steps. Then, through the gold of

the dead leaves and the withered grass the cubs would have splendid times : games, fights, somersaults and caperings, and walks on all-fours, until the leaves of the thickets turned crimson and withered away.

Winter came and clothed the cold forest in a warm padded cloak of snow, and Jack, well protected from the cold by his thick fur, spent the hard season along with his brothers in the deepest recess of his mother's den.

At the first call of spring, when the cuckoo came to rouse the green tree-tops with his cry, all the little bear family sneezed, moved and went to yawn in the sun and stretch their paws, numbed by the long winter sleep.

Guided by their mother, the little animals began to run about the forest. Jack followed like the rest, trying his hand at digging holes in the ground to look for roots, climbing up trees, or tearing off the bark with his nails.

Three years passed, making the wood-cutter's child into a very presentable bear-cub. He excelled in the feats of strength and tricks which his foster-brothers would try every day ; and, what is more, in spite of his tender years he was as big and strong as a man of twenty. His body was still covered with the curious thick fur ; but his face and hands, which had luckily become free from it, differed only in their bronzed colour from those of other mortals. His long curly hair, his big black eyes and his healthy complexion made him a very good-looking fellow indeed ; and to look at him you would have thought him the living image of a St. John the Baptist who had exchanged his camel's-hair garment for a bear-skin.

One day his foster-mother threw him astride of her back, and strode off slowly with him into the depths of the forest. As she went she told him in her bear language what she had just found out about the secret of his birth.

" I brought you up and fed you with my milk, deceived by your likeness to my sons the cubs," she concluded ; " but you are not of our race, and I should probably never have found out where you came from had it not been for the cleverness of my neighbour, Mr. Fox. He

came to see me, was very much startled by your appearance, and mocked me when I swore you were my real child. He started a search at once, and went one evening to listen at the door of your parents, who are wood-cutters in the forest. Knowing your people's language, he found out your story from your parents' sad lamentations over your fate, for they are very unhappy at your loss ; and Mr. Fox ran at once to undeceive me. ' That creature,' he said, ' is one of the accursed human race. Kill him without mercy.' No doubt it was good advice, for you are our sworn enemies ; but nevertheless I couldn't make up my mind to shed the blood of one who has sucked my milk, and whom for three years I have cherished as my own son. So I've decided to spare your life, and I am now taking you to your birth-place. But here we are before your parents' hut. Be good to them, for they love you at least as much as I love my cubs. Good-bye. Think sometimes of the creature who nourished you, and be as fine a man as the brave bear you promised to become."

With these words she lifted her big paw with its great claws and knocked three times at the hut door ; then, as some one was coming to open it, she shook off her burden quickly and ambled off on the way to her den.

The wood-cutter appeared in the doorway and looked at the newcomer with wide astonished eyes. The creature, as big as a man, furry as a bear, but with a child's face, gave him a great shock at first. He fell back a step and called his wife.

"Good Lord ! " she cried as soon as she saw the stranger. "Why, that's our Jack, our poor Jack we've mourned for so long. He's so like you that you can't deny it. . . . He's your living image, my poor husband. That's our Jack, I'll be bound. Heavens ! how he has grown ! How fine he's got ! How tall he is ! "

With these words she rushed to her son, and fearing neither claws nor teeth, she covered his cheeks with kisses.

Jack was astounded, and let her do it. Although he did not understand a single word of what his mother said, he guessed by her emotion that she recognized him as her son. He remembered the she-bear's words and, forcing himself to appear pleasant, he gave short growls of

content, arched his back and let them fondle him like a nice tame animal.

III

AFTER the first transports of joy were over, the two good people did not at all know what to do with their bear-cub son. In vain they spoke to him in their kindest tones ; he would listen, rolling

his big eyes and nodding his head, which is the way the animals he had left used to express their contentment. However, in spite of much good-will on both sides, they could not manage to understand one another, and evening came on before the wood-cutter and his wife had been able to get any sound approaching human speech from their son. But they were so pleased at having found him again that they could not weary of admiring him, and they watched him sleeping late into

the night. Jack was stretched out in front of the hearth and snoring contentedly.

From the next day the mother set to work with all the zeal of her maternal love to civilize her bear-cub.

She had the greatest trouble to make him wear clothes : he could not bear them, and would take them off ten times a day : she had to be continually dressing him. Finally, her patience conquered his wildness and ignorance. One fine day Jack Bruin made up his mind to speak. He babbled like a baby and often he made such violent efforts to express the thoughts that came into his head in words, that he would seize hold of his temples with both hands and shake his head hard from side to side, as if he wanted to make his thoughts fall out of it like fruit from a tree. The wood-cutter's wife also took care to cut his nails thoroughly, and they were now of a reasonable length.

After two long years of tender care, she had at last the happiness of hearing her child speak plainly and of seeing him behave like any other Christian. She was even astonished at Jack's intelligence, and in his lively curiosity he bewildered her with questions. The time soon came when the good woman had come to an end of her knowledge, and one night, before they went to sleep, she confessed proudly to her husband that the child now " knew as much as Mother and Father."

Jack Bruin was now in his sixth year, but you would have said he was over twenty-five, he was so tall and strong, and his parents were very proud of this. The wood-cutter took him to work with him ; the two were inseparable. They rose at daybreak and went off into the forest, their axes on their shoulders, carrying their midday bread in their wallets. They did not return till nightfall.

On Sundays Jack's one recreation was wandering through the forest. He would go off, armed with a stick, and come back at night carrying on his back the hide of some wild beast he had strangled with his mighty hands, the only weapon he ever used. Sometimes it was a wild-boar attacked in the depths of his lair ; a wolf whose head he had battered in, in some dark corner of the underwood ; or else he carried back a stag he had brought to bay and killed by wringing its neck as though it were a gosling.

He would throw his prey before the door of his father's hut, and then, drawing fresh water from the well, he would rub his furry arms vigorously and wash his body, which was sticky with blood, laughing and showing all his white teeth as he told his adventures.

So the days went by, happily and peacefully. Many springs and many winters passed : the trees fell one after the other under the two men's axes, leaving some clearer spaces in the wood ; first one wrinkle and then another furrowed the wood-cutter's honest face ; his wife's hair was getting silver ; and Jack Bruin was growing up, stronger from year to year. As straight as the young oaks he would fell with the blade of his axe, he was now a whole head taller than his father ; he carried his head high, and walked as coolly as a man does when he knows how strong he is. His expression was dignified and his hair fell in curls over his broad shoulders.

When he was twenty-one years old, one Sunday on his return from one of the hunting expeditions which were his one pleasure, he suddenly said to his parents, as he was sitting down with them for the evening meal :

" I am old enough to see the world. To-day my way chanced to lead me to the edge of the forest, and when I saw before my eyes all the fields and plains stretched out in God's bright sunshine, I suddenly felt that my destiny calls me away from here. For the first time in my life I saw the heavens stretch free above my head, I saw clouds, blue sky, space—And I want to go far, far away, straight in front of me, I know not where, to see more sky and countries and men, and their collections of houses they call cities, whose red roofs I saw glowing on the horizon. I want to try my luck. This forest is too small for me ; it suffocates me now I have felt the charm of open spaces, and if I stay here I shall die of discontent. I go to-morrow."

When they heard his decided tone and saw in his eyes that he had made up his mind, his parents realized that neither their prayers nor entreaties could induce him to change it. They were so convinced, that they had nothing to say, but bent their heads, and tears rose to their eyes. Having no more appetite, they pushed back their bowls and with heavy hearts they sat a long time in silence. But now and then

they looked, unobserved, at their son, who could only add to their sorrow.

"All right; go," said the wood-cutter at last, when he had swallowed his trouble. "Go, since it is your fate, but don't forget the two poor folk whose one affection and pride you are. Go, Jack Bruin, and I've no doubt but that you'll do great things; but remember us in joy and sorrow. Remember that whatever happens to you, this modest log-hut always shelters two very simple hearts which beat only for love of you."

The wood-cutter's wife was sobbing, her face hidden in her apron; she could not say a word the whole evening. At bed-time she could only give her son a long hug and weep anew with her head on his shoulder.

Jack Bruin was quite ready to give way, so touched was he at the sight of his mother's sorrow, and seeing how many tears he caused, he reproached himself bitterly. He gently unwound his mother's arms from his neck and went to the wide-open window and stood there, looking into the dark.

His mind was in a whirl; he was feverishly undecided. But a gentle breeze from the distant horizon which was calling to him passed over his hair, bewitching as a caress, holding out hopes for the future and banishing all scruples and uncertainties.

He shut his eyes. Under his closed lids he saw a triumphant vision of blue sky, glittering rivers, plains vibrating with light, miles and miles of country stretching out under the sun, cities where men lived. In his head sounded the alluring call of that space whose mystery excited his adventurous spirit. "I'll go," he said to himself. Some strong power which he could not control, put his parents' unhappiness out of his head. He suddenly forgot his mother's tears and his father's grief; smiling at dreams of the future, impatient to try his fortune and explore the vast world, he went and stretched himself on his couch of dry leaves, where he soon fell into a sleep troubled by no regrets.

The next day, with his wallet on his shoulder and a strong knotty staff in his hand, he took leave of his parents.

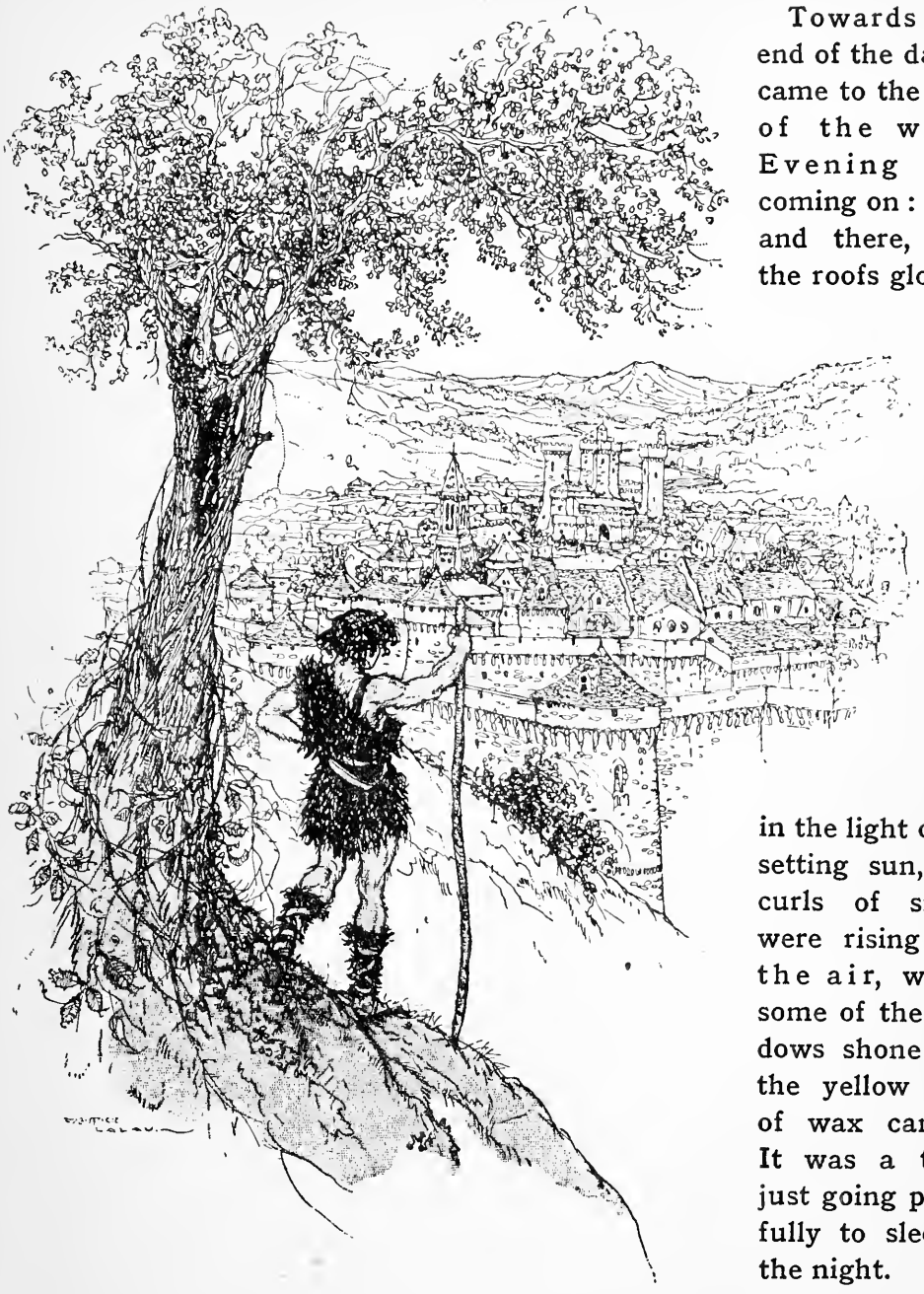
He walked off with a firm step, and did not look round till he came

to a bend in the path, where he turned just in time to see the wood-cutter's wife sink down on the threshold, with a last sign of farewell to him.

IV

AT first he walked with bent head, filled with remorse when he thought of the sorrow of the good folk he was leaving behind him ; but the birds sang so merrily, the air was so full of intoxicating smells and the sun sparkled so brightly on the tufts of moss in the glades that his cares soon faded away. Filled with delight, he listened to the music of the forest ; and soon he too began to sing, his gay song mingling with the blackbird's trills and the busy twittering of the finches. Sometimes a wood-pigeon would fly over him swift as an arrow, happy and free and flying who could say where : the young man would wave his hand to it as a man greets a fellow-traveller he passes on his way.

Jack Bruin walked for a long time, resting when he could near the springs, where he stopped to quench his thirst. He took a piece of brown bread from his wallet, ate it, and then started off again without loss of time, so eager was he to get beyond the shelter of the trees.



Towards the end of the day he came to the edge of the wood. Evening was coming on: here and there, over the roofs glowing in the light of the setting sun, thin curls of smoke were rising into the air, while some of the windows shone with the yellow light of wax candles. It was a town, just going peacefully to sleep in the night.

Jack Bruin grasped his stick more firmly and went down toward it with a decided step. "I am sure to find some good peasant there who will offer me a place to sleep in," he said to himself. He was thinking of the lost travellers whom his father the wood-cutter had received under his roof from time to time. Rich or poor, gentle or simple, wandering monks or tramps of the road, none had made a vain appeal to the good man's hospitality; they would rest their weary limbs, share the bread and fresh water, have their sleep out in full confidence, and start off again at dawn the next day, after having heartily thanked their host.

When he came close to the town, Jack was most surprised to find the road cut by a deep ditch. It was already late. The watchmen had sounded the curfew and behind its lowered portcullis, closed gates and raised draw-bridges, the city was silent and at rest. He shouted, but no voice answered. He decided to make a circuit of the rampart, hoping to find an open postern. It was a useless task: he saw nothing but the high walls protected by their broad girdle of stagnant water.

"This is new to me," he said to himself. "To-night I shall begin the hard preparation for my life of adventure, under the stars of Heaven. We'll sleep here under this bush. As I haven't a single halfpenny to my name I am better off than the dwellers in these houses, for I have no fear of thieves."

He lay down on the grass, and, having placed his wallet under his head for a pillow, he fell peacefully asleep.

The next day he awoke at the first glimmering of daylight, and shaking the dust from his clothes he went towards the town gate.

He went in, passed by the archers of the guard and examined their dress and their equipment.

He had never in his life seen any but wood-cutters' implements, and had not imagined any further armoury then bill-hooks, adzes, hatchets, saws or axes, and he was full of admiration of the halberds and partisans whose brightly-polished steel glittered, fixed at the end of a long pole.

In the streets he would make long halts in front of the booths and shops, finding at every glance a hundred objects whose shape puzzled him and bewildered his mind. "What can be the use of all this?" he wondered.

And a curious uneasiness came over him as he wandered through the maze of narrow streets.

He found he was most ignorant of the things of the world, and felt embarrassed by the way passers-by looked at him. The women pointed at him and sometimes burst out laughing. The men would turn round to look at him, dumbfounded to see him so tall and strong ; and as for the little children, they ran at the sight of him to hide in terror behind their mothers' skirts, as if they had seen a hideous bogey-man.

But he was never tired of admiring the houses with carved fronts, graceful decorations of little beams, whimsically disposed arches and glowing stained-glass windows. He stopped at every moment, turning clumsily round, at a loss where to go, and feeling suffocated in the midst of those innumerable windows through which inquisitive eyes were spying at him : he was already wishing himself back in his forest.

" Jack Bruin, my boy, city life is not in your line," he decided to himself. " What you want is open air and space, not these rat-holes which shelter your fellow-creatures : you can't move or turn round here without knocking up against one of those houses where the sun can certainly never penetrate. Come on, let's get out of this place ; we shall have nothing but tame adventures in a place where the people look at one as a strange wild beast. There's an honest-looking man coming along. He'll tell me the way to take to leave this town far behind me."

He went up to a stout citizen who was coming down the road lost in thought, his eyes fixed on the pavement.

Jack pulled off his cap politely and was about to speak : the other raised his eyes, but no sooner did he see the huge hairy creature than, taking him for one of those vagabonds who rob people in broad daylight, he took to his heels in an awful fright, as fast as his short legs would carry him. Jack saw his flight, but could not guess the reason of it, and stood there in astonishment. He was forced to go on his way, trusting to luck for guidance.

As he passed by a master-tailor's booth, he was able for the first time in his life to behold his own image. The ingenious workman

had placed a huge mirror of polished metal on one side of his shop, and over it he had written the words :

"For this alone my looking-glass
Is here to prove to you who pass,
Howsoever patcht you come,
Out you fare
With your money in my sack
And my clothes upon your back
Fit for king or millionaire."

Jack Bruin could not read, but, interested by the shining metal, he approached and after many hesitations realized that the person who moved when he moved, smiled when he smiled, and looked him straight in the face was actually himself.

"Well, I must say," he thought, "that good fellow was not to blame for fearing me as a thief. I do indeed look a sight in this awful old smock which shows my furry arms. I certainly deserve my surname, and if it were not that my face is like other men's, I should really take myself for a bear. Well, let's hurry up and get out of here! Now I have seen this portrait,

I don't much want to stay in a place where I shall never find anyone like myself.

Thinking thus, Jack set out again cheerfully.

Soon he passed through the gate and over the draw-bridge. When he was in the open country again, far from those high walls which had nearly stifled him, he stretched his strong limbs, and breathed deeply, rejoicing to feel the keen air of the plains once again.

He walked with long strides, singing an old wood-cutter's song at the top of his voice. Coming to cross-roads, he stopped undecided. Eight roads lay before him. Which should he take ?

"Upon my word ! " he thought, " one way or another, I don't care where I go. This little flower shall tell me which road I shall follow to good, or, perchance, to ill luck. What matters it to me ? "

He bent down, picked a buttercup, which was spreading out its burnished golden petals to the sun, and flung it as hard as he could into the air. The flower sped upwards and then, driven by the morning breeze, fell down on one of the eight roads.

" That's my road, then," said Jack Bruin.

He settled his empty wallet more firmly on his shoulders, tightened his belt round his waist, and set off merrily in the direction shown him by the buttercup.

V

AT about mid-day, as he was suffering pangs of hunger, he decided to go to a large farm-house which he saw some distance off, on his right.

"Good day, master," he said to the farmer civilly, taking off his cap to him. "I am a poor traveller without hearth or home, possessed

of nothing but two eyes which are anxious to see the world. Would you kindly give me something to eat?"

"Come, come, my friend," answered the other, "are you fool enough to think my house is an inn, standing open for all the poor beggars who choose to come in? There's no bread to eat here except for those who earn it. What can you do?"

"Everything and nothing. Only say how I could be of service, and I'll see if I can satisfy you."

"Well, you see that ugly great elm-tree growing in the middle of my orchard, preventing all the trees near it from giving any fruit by its shade? Well, I've decided to have it cut down, and I was just going to the town to get some wood-cutters when you turned up. If you can wield the axe, I would willingly employ you to get rid of it."

"Now that will do first-rate," said the young man, taking off his coat. "I am a working wood-cutter, master, and I know of no nobler profession than mine in the world. Come now, get me an axe, with a long handle and a solid steel blade, and I'll show you what I can do."

An axe was fetched. Jack grasped it, weighed it, turned it for a few seconds between his hands, judging his distance, and then he stood up firmly on both feet and raised the implement in both hands.

He smote.

A sharp whistling sound! the blade fell, cutting the air.

A heavy blow! the steel entered the wood.

A deep and ominous crack! And the tree, its bark shattered, and its fibres broken, shaking from crown to base, tottered and then hurtled to the ground in a shower of splinters and leaves.

Jack had felled the elm at a single blow as easily as a reaper cuts straw with his sickle. The axe had broken off in the middle and its notched and twisted blade lay far off in the moss.

"Well," asked the young man, brandishing the stump of his axe in his hands, "well, master farmer, are you satisfied?"

The latter, who would have been crushed by the fall of the tree had he not made a lucky jump out of the way, answered, still pale with fright and trembling in every limb:

"By all the Saints of Paradise, I now declare myself your humble servant, and I am so satisfied with what you have done that I beg you to be so good as to take the road again. Come, my men, go and fetch food to fill this honest fellow's wallet. For my part, I will take from my purse three fine golden crowns all shining in the sun. That is by no means too much for the wonderful work of such a powerful master."

With these words he was pushing Jack by the shoulders with many

salutations : his heart was in his mouth and his back bent down to the ground. He put the money into Jack's hand, helped him to shoulder his wallet, which was stuffed with provisions, and gave him a final most humble bow.

" Farewell, friend wood-cutter. God keep you ! "

Then, as soon as the young man had crossed his threshold, he hurriedly shut the heavy farm gate behind him, put up the bar and pushed the bolts, and, rejoiced to be rid at last of so terrible a guest, he loaded him in his own mind with curses, and commended him most heartily to all the devils.

Meanwhile, quite dumbfounded at such a windfall, Jack Bruin was walking away as fast as he could, driven by the fear that the farmer would change his mind and call him back to take away his money.

As soon as he was out of sight of the farm, he sat down by the side of the road and ate and drank his fill, and then, taking up his stick once more, he continued his journey straight in front of him.

Towards evening, as he was thinking of stopping at the next village, to break into his crowns by the price of a good supper and a comfortable bed, he met a carter who seemed to be in great difficulties. His cart had stuck in the sand at the bottom of a deep rut ; in vain he swore, cracked his whip and belaboured his horse, the wheels would not move, being sunk up to the axle in the dust.

His two companions were sweating in every pore, shoving against the spokes with all their force : neither horses nor men were of any avail, the cart stuck in the ground as if it had taken root. It contained a heavy load of pottery which the men were hawking from town to town ; there were saucepans and earthenware pans, jugs and basins, pitchers and dishes, all wrapped in straw and cleverly piled up.

" Hullo there, masters," said Jack, seeing their difficulty, " I fancy it would help you if I lent you a hand. Shall I try ? I believe I can be of some use to you this time."

One of the hawkers answered :

" Well, my good fellow, if you get us out of this, we will willingly give you a little something for your trouble. We've been working close on three hours to get out of this hole, and, as you see, we're no further

than before. This cart won't move for love or money! Come on, heave on the wheel for all you're worth, and I'll whip up the horse."

"There's no need for your horse, master," answered Jack Bruin

with a smile. "Just get out of the way and leave me alone: it's child's-play for me."

He took off his wallet, turned up his sleeves, and crawled under the cart. Then, going down on his hands and knees, he arched his back and hup! by just getting up he lifted the whole concern. But he did it so heartily that he completely upset the whole thing on the other side of the ditch.

There was a horrible noise of broken crockery, a clattering hail of splinters and broken glass, and the horse, with all four hoofs in the air, was kicking up at the moon which was just beginning to show itself.

"Ah, you ruffian, you rascal, accursed thief!" cried the three hawkers. "A pest on you, you clumsy dog! Now you've been and ruined us!" And, rushing at him, they belaboured him soundly, hitting him with their whips, their fists, and their feet.

Jack Bruin gave way before their attack, parrying the blows as best he could.

"Gently, masters, gently; give us a chance," he cried, without getting angry, for he felt their blows about as much as an elephant feels the stings of flies; "spare yourselves, and don't get hurt hitting me like this. I mean well; I am only guilty of not knowing my own strength. Come now, leave off, or I shall get angry myself! Leave off, I tell you."

But, far from appeasing them, this speech only made them angrier still.

"Very well, then," cried Jack Bruin, "I'll shake some reason into you, you quarrelsome fellows."

He quickly caught hold of the three of them by the collar, and taking them all in his right hand he began shaking them violently, so much so that their poor heads banged together and wobbled about on their necks like nuts on a twig.

"Now will you leave off?"

With bleeding noses and bruised cheeks the three men begged for mercy. And when Jack Bruin let them go, they only had enough strength left to fall on their knees and beseech him in fear and trembling to grant them their lives.

"Get up," he said. "I wish you no harm, and I am really very sorry about this business. Moreover, to show you that I meant nothing wrong in helping you, I will, as best I can, pay you for the damage I did unintentionally. Here, take these three golden crowns: that is my entire fortune. Take them. I give them willingly, and only regret that I can do no more."

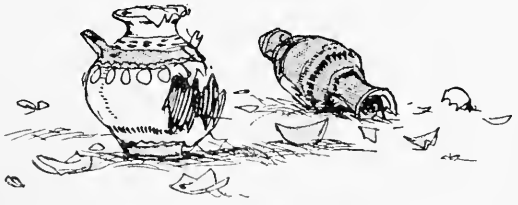
He picked up his wallet and left the three hawkers without even deigning to look back.

Night was falling. He therefore made up his mind to sup as well as he could on the remains of his provisions. He examined the countryside to find a bush to shelter him, and having selected one he had his supper, and then lay down full-length and went to sleep in the open air.

The light of dawn woke him up. He listened to the lark's song, looked at the sun, which was just coming out of the rosy glow on the horizon, and then, having watched this sight as long as he liked, he got up and started on his way once more.

He travelled for three long weeks, stopping sometimes in villages, towns or hamlets to ask for work. But no sooner had he shown his strength than they hastened to be rid of him.

Driven out of every place, he finally reached the frontier of the kingdom and stepped bravely on to foreign soil.



VI

NOW one day, when he was going along, rather troubled by his prodigious strength, which was causing him more disappointment than pleasure, he saw a remarkable man ahead of him who was walking along carrying a heavy slab of stone comfortably on his head.

Jack hurried to catch him up, and great was his astonishment when he saw the curious stranger was dragging behind him two heavy cast-iron cannon-balls attached to his belt by iron chains.

Urged by curiosity, Jack spoke to him.

" Allow me to ask you, master, what makes you walk about in this extraordinary way ? "

" Alas ! " answered the man with the stone, " believe me, it's not for pleasure that I go about loaded up like this. But nature has made me so light that if I didn't take the precaution of weighing myself down,

you would see me walking, not on the ground like other men, but right up in the air, at least fifty fathoms above your head. You can imagine how painful this infirmity is to me. Up at that height I can't find anything to eat or drink, and if the worst came to the worst, I should have to trust to the chance of coming across a weathercock, which is certainly useful for showing the wind, but no use at all for cooking. So I have to put on ballast, so that I don't leave the earth ; if not, I'd die of hunger."

"I must say that is a very curious thing," answered Jack Bruin, "and I pity you from my heart."

The two men continued their journey for some time without speaking. Now and then Jack stopped behind to contemplate his new friend's appearance. He was inwardly surprised at his easy and graceful bearing : the stone seemed to weigh no more on his head than the down on that of a gosling. As to the cannon-balls, they followed behind him, leaping and hovering in the air, and if it had not been for the awful noise they made scraping on the pebbles of the road they would really have seemed as light as two soap-bubbles.

Jack stared with all his eyes, approached and then retreated, thinking about this strange phenomenon. Suddenly he spoke again :

"I have just thought, my friend, that perhaps, I might be of great service to you. Let me tell you that Heaven has endowed me with prodigious strength, which is at least as troublesome to me as your unfortunate lightness. It occurs to me that I might use my fatal strength to relieve you. What do you think ? There can be no harm in trying. Throw away your stone and take off those cannon-balls. I can manage to keep you down here, believe me, and I am strong enough, even if I only put my hand on your shoulder, to prevent your flying away. Come, is it agreed ? Let's try."

"We'll see what happens," said the man philosophically.

He got rid of his burdens and, to his great joy, was soon convinced that Jack Bruin had told him the truth.

"Oh, how splendid ! " he cried. "Under your mighty fist I feel safer on my legs than I ever was before. But for the love of Heaven, don't leave go of me, my friend, and let's go on together like this. I am

enormously obliged, and will devote myself to your service to repay you for your kindness to me.''

'' I accept with pleasure,'' answered Jack, '' but, as it might happen that I should want both arms in our common defence and should have to take my hands off you, I propose this plan : we'll buy a rope at the next village, long enough to reach to the height you usually fly up in the air. You must wind it round your waist, and then if by any chance I were forced to let you fly away, you'd only have to let it drop from where you are, I'd pull on the end which touched the ground and could easily bring you back. It would be child's play. Every night at bed-time I will tie you securely to some tree or post or rock ; so you can have your night's rest in peace. . . . Now tell me your name, my friend, without further ceremony, for we are henceforward going to live the same life together.''

'' That's a very natural question, but it puts me in a great difficulty. My name, you say ; yes, to be sure—my name. Well, let me tell you, my friend, that, as far as I remember, I never had one. Since I entered this world I have known neither parents nor friends, and up to now I have been too busy fighting my infirmity to take the trouble to baptize myself. But to oblige you I will think to-night, and after a good sleep I'll tell you the name I choose to-morrow.''

'' Never put off till to-morrow what you might do to-day. Look

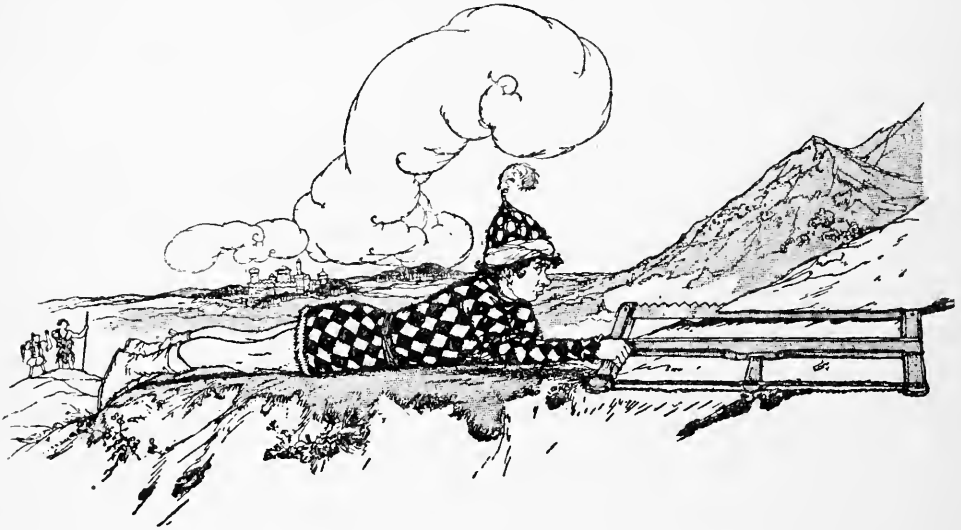
here, as you're so light, I'd like to call you Flying Feather. Does that suit you ? ''

'' Done with you ! '' replied the other. '' That suits me very well. And what may your name be ? ''

'' I'm called Jack Bruin.''

They continued their journey and soon came to a high mountain which barred the way.

It rose steep and solitary, and very dreary were its precipitous sides,



and the few tufts of heather and sickly stonecrops which clung here and there.

The two comrades stood still for a moment in great perplexity, wondering if they would not be forced to turn back. In vain their eyes examined the high, bare wall : no sign of a path cut in the rock, no jutting stones ; nothing but the smooth stone, broken up here and there by narrow cracks filled with greenish patches of lichen. A few lizards, sticking their eager heads out of the cracks where they lay, gazed with their eyes of jet at the travellers' confusion.

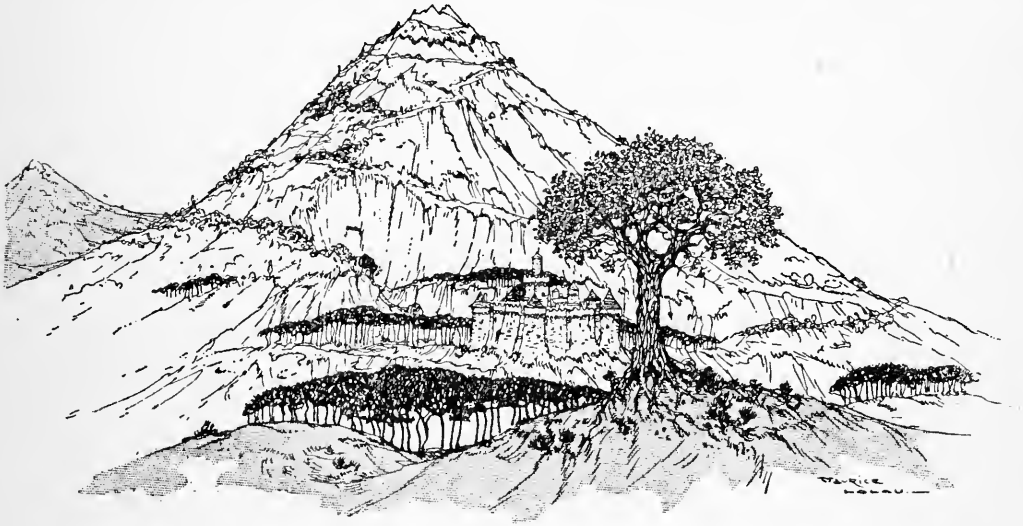
All round them the plain was deserted.

'' Does no one live in this accursed country ? '' said Jack Bruin at last.

And he faced round in turn towards all the points of the compass, looking to the world's end for some one to help him. He stamped on the ground impatiently.

"Look here, Flying Feather," he went on, "I'm going to let you fly up, and you can look down from the air, as if you were in an observatory, and spy the surrounding country. Perhaps you will find some good peasant who will tell us where to go."

With these words he took his hand from Flying Feather's shoulder.



The latter rose with a mighty bound to about fifty fathoms from the ground.

When he was up there he shaded his eyes with his hand :

"Ah ! " he cried, "hardly a league away from us I can see a human being lying full-length on the ground, working at something or other. Pull the rope, Jack Bruin, and bring me down again. I've marked the place where the man is very carefully, and we'll go there as soon as you've set me on my legs again."

Jack Bruin hauled his friend down, and they both set off to see what they could find.

After an hour's walk, they saw the man Flying Feather had spoken of. Lying flat on his face on the ground, he was working a long saw,

the end of which was already half under the foot of the mountain. They went up to him, but he did not deign to look round.

"Hi there, my friend," cried Jack Bruin, "what extraordinary work are you trying to do?"

At the sound of his voice, the other got up. With the back of his hand he wiped the sweat which was running down his face, and answered calmly:

"You can see, master, I am sawing at this mountain which prevents me from passing, and I hope to have finished the job before sunset." Then he started working again.

In great astonishment the two companions watched him. He worked his tool to and fro steadily, and each time he pushed it the teeth ate into the stone they were cutting as if it had been soft wood.

He had soon cut out a hole big enough for a man to pass through.

"Now then," he said, as though speaking to himself, "this is the trouble: how are we to get the opening free?"

Jack Bruin interrupted him:

"If I understand rightly, we've got to get rid of the sort of cone you've just cut out."

"Exactly."

"Well, if you'll let me get at the passage, I offer you my services willingly."

"Most certainly, with all my heart; but I don't quite see. . . ."

"Patience, patience," answered Jack Bruin.

He tied Flying Feather to a heavy stone to prevent his flying away, and having got his hands free, he seized his iron-bound stick and attacked the mountain just where the saw had cut it.

He hit the rock such a blow that it flew into pieces.

"Do you see, my fine sawyer?" he said. "It's my turn now. You rest yourself, and I'll work for every one."

Wondering greatly, the sawyer watched him shatter the granite and then lift blocks of stone big enough to kill an elephant and throw them away as easily as a child throws a ball. Jack Bruin disappeared, advancing further into the hole as he cleared it out.

Soon the ground all round was strewn with loose rock, and from the end of the passage a cheery voice rang out :

" I've done it ! I've come to the end and I can see daylight on the other side of the mountain."

Then Jack reappeared, pouring with sweat.

" By Jove," he said, " it was awfully hot working in that horrible passage."

He wiped his brow, rested a little time, recovered his breath and then set to work to untie Flying Feather, who, a prisoner to a block of stone, found the time pass very slowly.

" My friend," said the sawyer to Jack Bruin, " now I've seen you at work I humbly recognize you to be my master, and I will be honoured if you will consent to let me serve you. You look to me, both you and your friend, as if you were just seeing the world, and as I like nothing so much as adventures, my greatest wish is to join you."

" So let it be, then," answered Jack. " Come with us, my fine fellow. And as you seem to understand cutting mountains remarkably well, I shall call you Hillchopper. Pick up your saw, and let's be moving on."

They all three entered the rocky passage, and came out into a beautiful valley through which a broad river was winding.

It was easy for them to pass over it without even wetting their ankles. They hung on to Flying Feather's rope and he lifted them all, in spite of their weight, to a height of over five fathoms above the water and took them to the other side in less time than it takes to write it. As a matter of fact he walked far faster in the air than we can on the earth, which is easily explained if one remembers that having no ground to press on nor any stones to crush with his feet, he could take as long strides as he pleased.

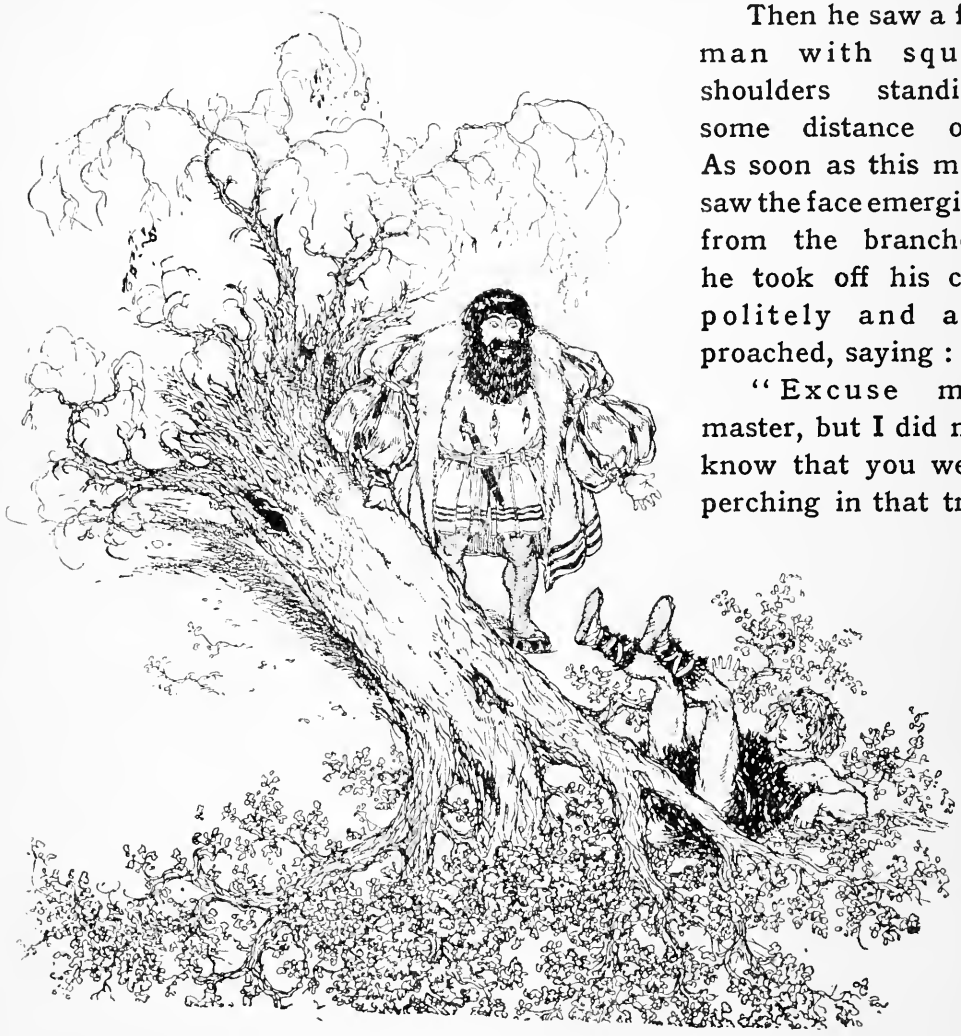
On coming to the opposite bank they considered how to come down.

As the strange-looking trio was just passing a tall oak-tree, Jack Bruin clung on to a branch and sat astride of it. He was busily bringing Flying Feather back by hauling on the rope, when he suddenly felt the tree shake beneath him. He clung on to the foliage, but the oak

heaved, turned round, came out of the ground, then crashed violently to the earth, carrying him with it.

Hillchopper was thrown over his master, and the shock was so great that Flying Feather at the end of his string was dancing, zigzagging and pitching about like a kite in a squall.

"What on earth is happening?" cried Jack Bruin in an angry tone, stretching his head out of the branches where his body was stuck fast.



Then he saw a fat man with squat shoulders standing some distance off. As soon as this man saw the face emerging from the branches, he took off his cap politely and approached, saying:

"Excuse me, master, but I did not know that you were perching in that tree

They hung on to Flying Feather's rope and he lifted them all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just when I uprooted it, and I should be most grieved to think I had caused you the slightest hurt ! ''

'' What ? '' answered Jack Bruin, getting himself out of the branches and going towards him. '' Then my biting the dust so extremely hard just now is your doing, is it ? By Jove, what strength ! Shake hands, my friend ; you should be one of us.'' He held out his hand to the uprooter and, having hauled down Flying Feather, he introduced him, and also Hillchopper, whose nose was bleeding slightly on account of a stone he had knocked against by mistake.

The acquaintance was soon made, and the broad-shouldered man consented with all his heart to join the three companions.

'' Since you can uproot a tree so bravely, my friend, you shall be called Oaktwister,'' proposed Jack Bruin.

'' All right, let it be Oaktwister,'' answered the other. '' I like the name, for I can indeed twist an oak in my hands as easily as most men would wring a gosling's neck.''

Hillchopper picked up his saw, Flying Feather finished binding his rope round his hips, Oaktwister pulled down his sleeves, Jack Bruin dusted himself down, and they started without delay, for the sun was just sinking behind the crest of the hills.

VII

NIGHT was falling when the four travellers came to a village, and looked round for an inn.

They found one at some distance from the last houses, by the side of a road, at the end of which they caught sight of the huge outline of an old castle.

"What's that building?" asked Jack Bruin of the innkeeper, who had come running up when he saw them approach. "Is there some king, prince, or duke living near you?"

"Oh, sir," answered the other, showing signs of great terror, "we won't speak of that. You'd much better come straight into my kitchen, where you can refresh your nostrils with the good smell of roast chicken. And up there on the upper storey I've got rooms with nice beds with white sheets scented with lavender—rooms where you can sleep the peaceful sleep of a good Christian without having anything to do with the spectres, phantoms, demons, devils, bogeys and ghosts which hold their accursed revels behind those castle walls. . . ."

The innkeeper looked furtively round, and then, pointing with a trembling finger to the dark mass of the castle:

"Come in quickly, sirs," he murmured; "it's not good to stay out after nightfall in this country! And the mere sight of that gloomy barrack all black against the grey sky gives me cold shivers through my bones."

The four friends, who were very hungry, went in without being pressed any further.

Jack Bruin remained thoughtful all through dinner. He could not get the innkeeper's strange talk out of his head. So the table was no sooner cleared than he cried:

"Here, master, bring us a big flagon of hippocras and goblets for my friends and myself, and then bring your mug too; you shall drink with us. Sit down by us and tell us the story of the enchanted castle: I shall never rest till I know the whole of it."

The host went to get his mug. After much ceremony he sat down on a stool opposite the four friends. He smiled at them, filled up their

cups, and then, stretching his legs luxuriously and crossing his hands over his stomach, he sighed :

" By the Lord, our Lady the Virgin and all the patron saints of the country, it's nicer in my inn than in the manor-house next door. This fire crackling on our hearth, the nice smell of our fowls which were roasted for you just now and which our practised nostrils can still smell here and there in the kitchen—that's what rejoices the heart of an honest innkeeper. My late father, God keep his soul, speaking of the joys of having one's own inn, used to say. . . ."

Jack Bruin, who could not contain his impatience, interrupted him :

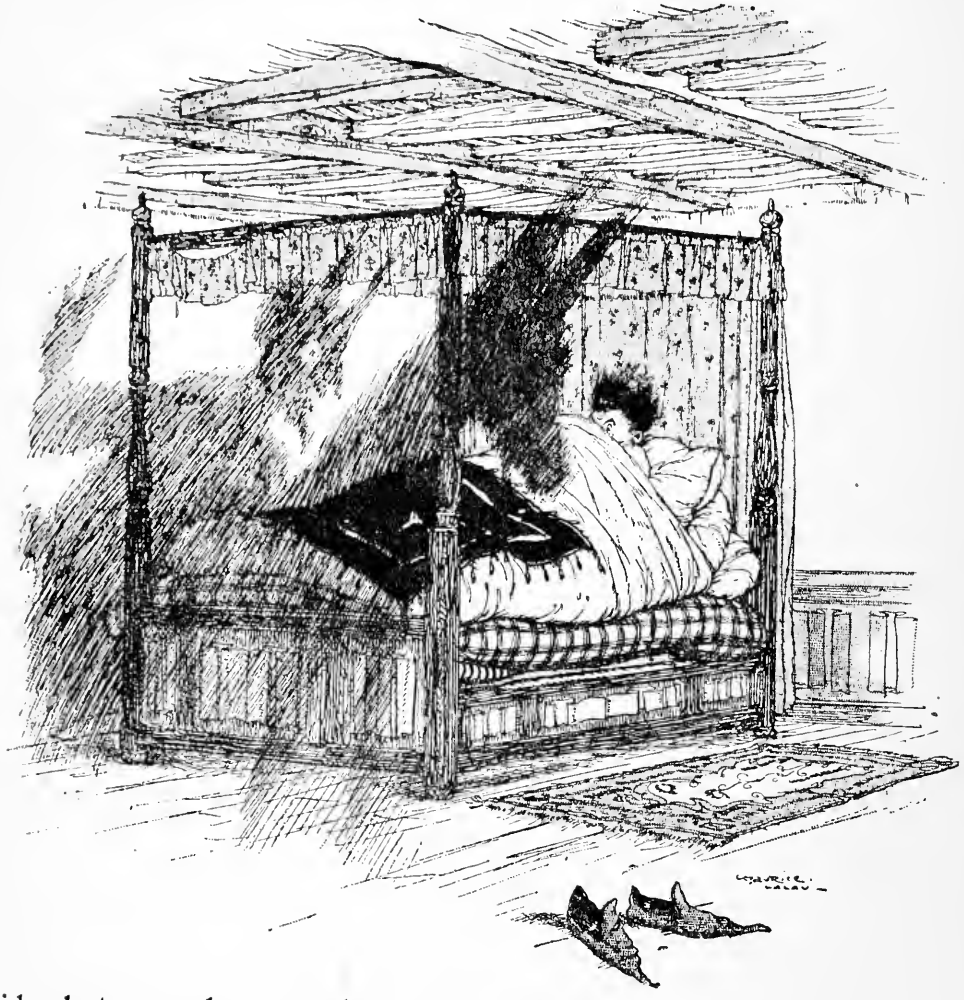
" Come, I say, that's enough, master. No more of your babble ! I can tell you're a man who likes to gossip ; but as your tongue is evidently so well oiled, for Heaven's sake don't wear it out discoursing about the joys of home. Rather liven it up with a good drink of hippocras, and tell us the story of that castle."

" Upon my word, sir," said the host, after drinking a large bumper, " to tell the truth, I don't know much for certain, and I could only tell you the rumours which go about the country-side. I've known many who could tell you better than I. . . . People have come here, on purpose or by chance, from all corners of the world. They've sat down at that very table where you are now, and I've talked to them as I am talking to you now—there were fine-looking men and ugly men, young men and old ones—and then they have all left me to try their luck. But until now not one has come back—not one."

He paused, cut the wicks of the candles, which were flaring, with the snuffers, and after having taken a draught, he went on :

" Know, then, sirs, that the castle has been deserted for years and years. My late father certainly asserted in his lifetime that he remembered its being inhabited, but I must confess that I've always known it as it is now. They say that there are beautiful princesses shut up behind its walls, kept prisoner by a terrible enchantment. And there are also supposed to be halls full of gold and precious stones, guarded by demons, gnomes, spirits, giants, wild beasts and other ghastly creatures. Many people have come, eager to try their luck, trusting to their lucky star or their courage ; I told you that just now.

Most of them have been killed miserably trying to climb the outer wall, which is nearly a hundred fathoms high : others have got to the top with the most miraculous skill—I saw them disappear on the other



side, but none has ever been seen again. What can be behind that wall ? . . . No human being could tell. But I may add that I've seen with my own eyes a thick column of black smoke rising from that infernal region ; that often an eagle hovers over the turret where he must have built his eyrie ; and that five or six times a year you can

hear something in the air at night, like some dreadful devils or phantoms passing by : voices, cries, the clanking of armour and chains, the frantic gallop of breathless horses. If I've been rightly informed, that is when the enchanter goes to visit the captive princesses. But I can't rightly say either way ; for not only is their passage very rapid, but I've never had rash curiosity nor courage enough to open my window to look at it. With a cold sweat all over me, my hair standing on end in my fright, more than half-dead with terror, I've only just the strength to hide under the bed-clothes during those appalling moments and to say most fervently the prayer against ghosts which our good priest taught me.''

'' Heavens alive ! '' exclaimed Jack Bruin, '' that makes my mouth water ! What a tale ! There's everything the heart could desire : ghosts, enchanters, demons, mystery and a thousand chances to one that the business will cost one one's skin ! What do you say, friends ? For my part, I am for trying my luck to-morrow. Will you come too ? Speak your minds without boasting, bragging or embarrassment. Dastards, cowards, skulkers and poltroons can find plenty of shelter in the inn. If one of you hesitates or feels his heart sink in his bosom, let him stay here, with his feet in the fender ! He can wait in peace and safety for the day of our return, which, if I am to believe our host, will very likely never dawn.''

'' We will follow you, Jack Bruin,'' answered the other three, '' even though the road to the castle should lead us straight to hell.''

'' That's what I call talking. Good for you ! Now then, drink up, comrades ! Let's spend to-night in feasting and merry talk. Who knows ? Perhaps to-morrow our skulls may serve as goblets for my lords the crows ! Come now, make merry ; bring hippocras ! ''

VIII

NEXT day, the four friends left the inn at daybreak. Nothing would dissuade them, neither the wise speeches of the host nor the prayers of his wife, who could not take her tear-dimmed eyes off Jack.

"Alas!" she groaned to herself, "can it be possible in the name of God that so fine a young man should be going to his death with a light heart?"

Indeed, his face pleased her extremely, but she did not know that under his clothes he was as furry as a bear.

After touching farewells, they went off singing.

They took nothing with them but a strong crowbar which was to help them in their climb. In the distance they saw the wall, tall and gloomy, and all grey except where it was broken here and there by stunted bushes, which, having grown in the crevices of the stones, hung down drearily and let the wind play in their withered branches.

They walked for two good hours.

Gradually, as they got nearer, they could distinguish the details better; and they could not suppress a movement of horror on seeing that what they had taken from a distance for withered branches hanging from the crevices of the stones were nothing less than the blackened skeletons of their unfortunate predecessors.

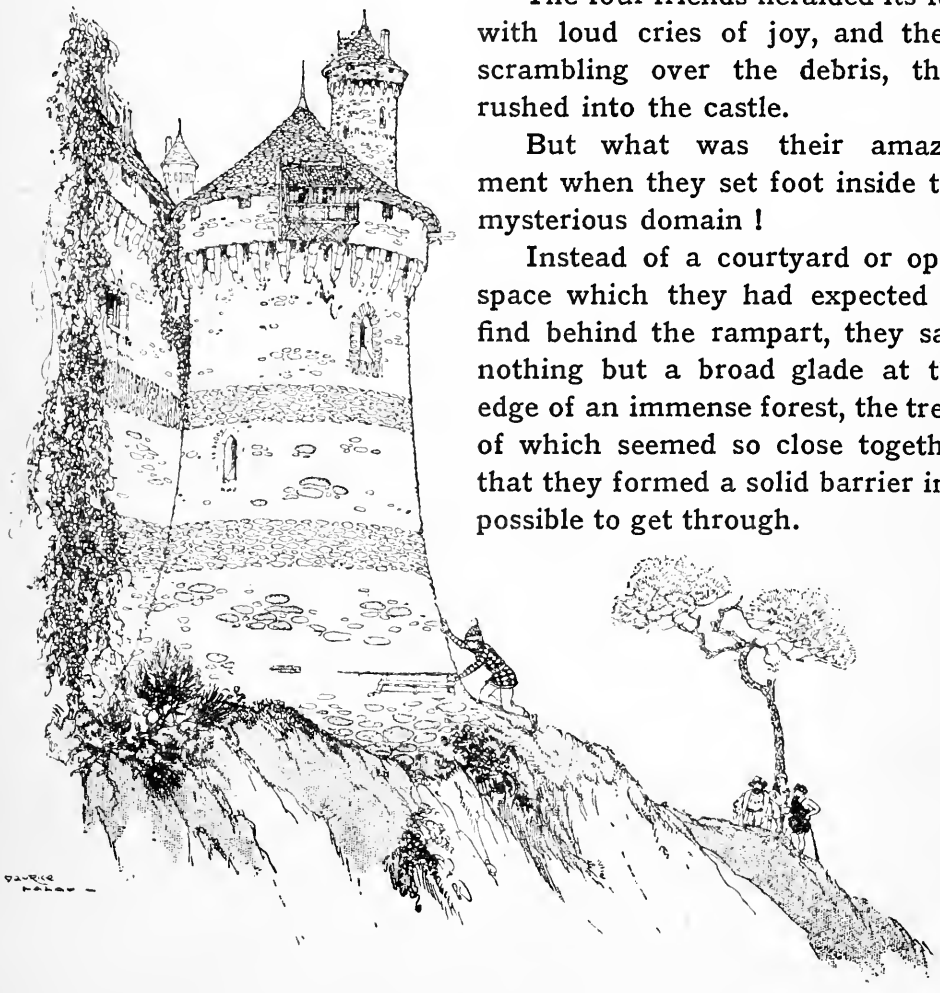
When they reached the foot of the wall they stood a moment in silence, gazing on this ghastly sight. All around them the ground was strewn with skulls and bones, weapons, broken ladders and coils of rope.

Above their heads, all along the fatal wall, the fleshless bodies of those who had fallen before reaching the top remained hanging on great iron spikes which had been stuck in to help them in their climb.

But the sight of all this desolation did not frighten the four friends. They took counsel together. At first they thought of using Flying Feather, but as he was not able to rise more than fifty fathloms in the air, he would hardly have got half-way up the rampart. So they resolved to have recourse to Hillchopper; who thereupon seized his saw

and, having decided upon one of the corner towers, made up his mind to cut it down to the level of the ground, which he managed to do after a few hours' work.

Oaktwister and Jack Bruin then went up, and uniting their forces they seized hold of the crowbar. With the help of that implement and their four strong arms they soon dug a large breach in the ashlar. All of a sudden, the tower, being no longer supported by its base, tottered and then collapsed with a terrific noise.



The four friends heralded its fall with loud cries of joy, and then, scrambling over the debris, they rushed into the castle.

But what was their amazement when they set foot inside the mysterious domain !

Instead of a courtyard or open space which they had expected to find behind the rampart, they saw nothing but a broad glade at the edge of an immense forest, the trees of which seemed so close together that they formed a solid barrier impossible to get through.

And then suddenly, before they had recovered from their astonishment, a horrible monster appeared at the edge of the wood and rushed at them.

"Come on, Oaktwister!" cried Jack Bruin, and without thinking let go of Flying Feather, who immediately bounded fifty fathoms into the air, carrying with him the crowbar, which had been given into his care.

Oaktwister and Jack Bruin hastily faced the creature: it had a bull's body and a long snake's neck, at the end of which two venomous crocodiles' heads, belching forth fire and smoke, waved threateningly.

"You take one, Jack Bruin, and I'll take the other," cried Oaktwister.

With these words he seized hold of the left-hand head and snapped it off like a twig, while his friend dealt that on the right a single blow with his fist which caused bones, blood and brains to burst violently forth.

The monster sprang back, leaving his necks as a gory trophy in the hands of his conquerors; then he rushed at them once again; he had grown two more heads!

The struggle began afresh.

Having been three times driven back, the creature returned three times to the attack. His assailants were weakening; they had had quite enough. Pouring with sweat and covered with blood, they were fighting in desperation. The brute was rushing on for a fourth attack when suddenly it stumbled forward on its knees, with a horrible cry. From far above, Flying Feather, seeing the danger, had just dropped the crowbar, which pierced the monster's side and was now fixing him firmly to the ground as a butterfly's delicate body is fixed to the wall with a pin.

"Victory! Victory!" he cried up in the air.

Jack immediately hauled him down again, and they all embraced in great delight at having, thanks to their dear friend's cleverness, escaped a ghastly death. Then they finished off the hideous brute and pulled the crowbar out of his body.

They made their way towards the forest. . . .

And then—horror of horrors! Their hair stood on end under their caps: brave warriors as they were, they trembled and shivered in their shoes as they saw the whole forest slowly and steadily moving upon them!

They tried to flee. . . .

But when they turned round, they found that the rampart had closed up of itself at their heels. They would perish, crushed between the trees and the wall!

"Get behind me! Leave it to me!" cried Oaktwister.

They obeyed. And their noble friend rolled his sleeves right up and, holding his arms in front of him in readiness, waited the onslaught.

The forest was advancing down the mossy slope, on which it seemed to glide noiseless and terrifying, with no rustle of its leaves or movements of its branches.

There was an ominous silence.

And the space between the men and that sliding mass was getting less second by second. The moving trees, lined up trunk to trunk, were advancing like an impenetrable wall, preceded by their shadow, which swept on like an inky tide, slowly swallowing up the grass blade by blade. Soon this shadow was covering our four friends' feet, then it reached to their waists, their chests, their heads, and suddenly submerged them altogether in its blackness.

In this darkness Oaktwister, alone against that army, began to fight.

He seized oaks, ashes and birches in his strong hands, twisted them, uprooted them and flung them down dead at his feet. A crackling shower of earth descended dismally, dropping from the roots like blood from a shot bird.

By this time the forest had encroached on all sides and was pressing against the wall. There was nothing to be seen but tree-tops as far as the eye could reach. The regular fall of the trees and the crash of broken branches were the only indications of the terrible battle going on beneath. And the road, which the invisible Oaktwister was cutting out below, left a long and advancing furrow on the surface of that sea of foliage.

Finally, after many hours, the man's courage got the better of the forest. The last trunk crashed down, defeated by Oaktwister's untirable hands ; and the four friends emerged from that accursed shadow and saluted the sun with repeated cries of joy.

The day was declining : the sky was bathed in a purple glow fringed with pale gold, and in the ruddy light which stained the windows the castle rose silent, impressive and forbidding.

It was built of grey stone on courses of porphyry : broad marble steps led to the rooms, whose wide-open doors seemed to invite the travellers to go on.

Inside no sound was to be heard : no birds sat perched on the roof ; no sparrows hid beneath the water-spouts. Nothing. There was silence everywhere, a silence of the grave, which made this sinister dwelling look still more imposing in the gloomy twilight.

Filled with anxiety, the friends did not dare to advance, fearing some sudden attack, but soon the serene calm which was reigning over the place restored their confidence.

They embraced each other warmly, congratulating themselves on having escaped death : they thanked Oaktwister, the hero of this last adventure, and then, feeling cheered by the embrace, they started off together and walked abreast up the staircase.

When they got inside, they were surprised to find it beautifully kept up, as though the last inhabitants had only just left it. Instead of spiders'-webs, dust, disorder and ruins, which they had expected to find in such a deserted spot, they saw on all sides polished floors, perfect furniture and fresh hangings.

On the brightly-polished sideboards shone gold and silver plate. Chairs with painted backs were drawn up along the walls, which were hung with silk. Candelabra with tall candles in them stood on long oak tables so well polished that you could see your face in them.

They went through several halls, and were loud in their admiration of the high ceilings, luxurious furniture, and neatness and order which reigned everywhere.

And as the sun had just gone down outside, suddenly all the lights in the palace where lighted at once. A flame burned at the end of every

The castle rose silent, impressing and forbidding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candle, and the mysterious dwelling was illuminated from cellar to attic. The shutters shut of themselves. Under the mantelpiece the smouldering fire burned up, flickered, and then flamed brightly. Cones of incense were crackling on bronze tripods and giving out a delicious smell, and a distant melodious sound of harps and viols reached the ears of the four friends.

Guided by the music, they walked on still further, and as they reached a tall vaulted hall, paved with malachite and inlaid with ebony and ivory, the mysterious orchestra stopped playing.

They stood still.

Before them was a long table which seemed laid for their benefit. It was loaded with inviting dishes ; magnificent fruit lay in onyx bowls ; the plate was of gold and the goblets carved out of the purest crystal. A cheerful row of flagons were ranged on the table-cloth of the finest linen : four places were laid, and in front of each stood a chair with a high finely-worked back seeming to await its guest.

" Come on, my friends," said Jack Bruin ; " let us sit down to table without ceremony. I'm dying of hunger, and to judge from the gleam of your eyes, I believe you as well as I will do full honour to the feast provided by the mysterious lord of this castle."

They all sat down.

And soon the feast made them forget all the discomforts of a trying day. The food was delicious and the wines generous.

After their meal our four friends, who were extremely weary, felt no desire to sit very late into the night.

Oaktwister was the most tired of them all. Hillchopper, seeing him rubbing his sleepy eyes with both hands, spoke thus :

" Our friend here has done such noble work to-day that he needs to get to sleep as quickly as possible. I propose that we each seek out a good bed."

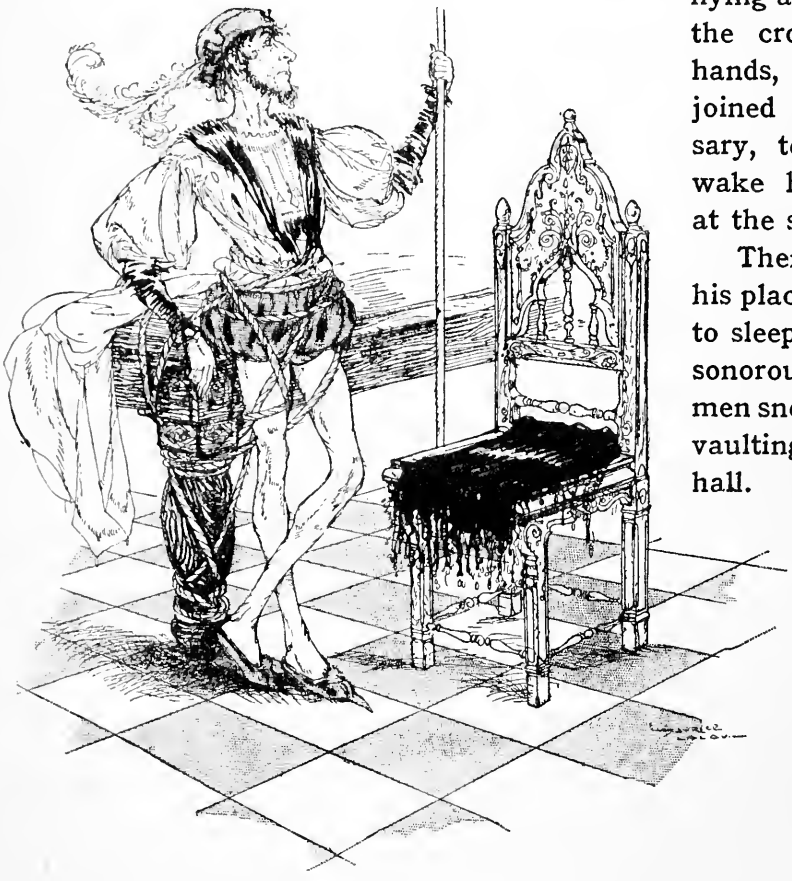
" Well, I don't know," said Jack Bruin, " I can't say that I put much trust in the hospitality of a host who sends a two-headed monster and a walking forest to meet his guests. We might pay dear for our sleep. Now this is what I think would be best. Don't let us go far from here, for we know this room, and we don't know what there is

next door. 'A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush,' says the proverb, and this is the time to act upon it. So let's lie down on this beautiful floor with a cushion for a pillow. Three of us will sleep and the fourth will keep watch for the safety of all."

This plan was adopted without further discussion. They drew lots for who should stay awake this first night, and it fell to Flying Feather.

"Now be very careful not to give way to weariness, my friend," advised the others. "Keep your eyes open, and if you feel sleep coming over you, pinch yourself till the blood comes. Remember that the safety of all of us depends on you."

They tied Flying Feather firmly to the table to prevent him from flying away; they gave the crowbar into his hands, and they enjoined him, if necessary, to call out and wake his companions at the slightest noise.

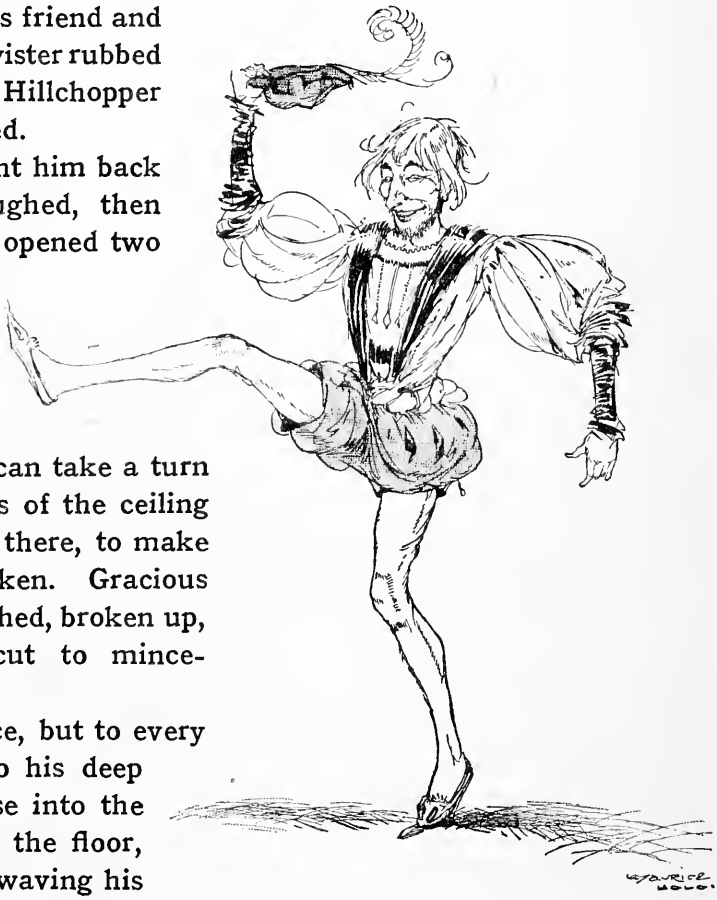


Then each one chose his place and lay down to sleep; and soon the sonorous sound of three men snoring rose to the vaulting of the lordly hall.

Flying Feather watched as best he could, his eyes wide open and his ears alert for the slightest sound.

IX

THE next day at the first gleam of dawn our three friends awoke, brisk and ready for anything. But what was their emotion on catching sight of Flying Feather lying unconscious at the foot of the table to which his rope kept him fast. Jack Bruin ran to his friend and raised his head, while Oaktwister rubbed his temples with wine, and Hillchopper gazed at him open-mouthed.



These cares soon brought him back to life: he sneezed, coughed, then sneezed again, and finally opened two big astonished eyes and looked around him. Then suddenly his memory returned:

"Quick, my friends! Untie me quick, so that I can take a turn in the air under the beams of the ceiling and dance about freely up there, to make sure that I've no bones broken. Gracious goodness! I've been thrashed, broken up, ground to powder and cut to mince-meat!"

They untied him at once, but to every one's great surprise and to his deep stupefaction he did not rise into the air; he remained lying on the floor, where he struggled about, waving his arms and legs in the air and contorting himself like a fish flapping about on dry land.

"Oh! oh!" he cried, "what a marvel! Oh! oh! what a wonderful thing! I am heavy, do you hear? I'm as heavy as lead! Look at me! Only just look at me! I've got back my weight. I'm

as heavy as anyone else ! Oh ! Beloved enemy, generous assailant ! bless you ! bless you ! May all the saints in Paradise take you under their strong protection ! You have saved me from the worst sort of martyrdom. Hurrah ! let me try to dance and run and walk. Come to me, glorious earth ; from henceforward you are wedded to the soles of my boots : you are theirs, yes, darling earth, ground of my dreams ! What joy ! What bliss ! What delight ! ''

Flying Feather bounded up, pushed his friends aside, and began to cut a thousand mad capers and pirouettes. He walked, he trotted and he galloped : then leapt and bounded in so comical a fashion that the spectators roared with laughter and held their sides to see him.

He finally ran to each of his friends and flung his arms round their necks, then he sank down exhausted against the wall, where he remained sitting, perspiring and breathless, while the others were half suffocated with laughter.

Jack Bruin calmed himself first :

'' What in the name of Heaven is the matter, Flying Feather ? ''

'' I haven't the least idea. My memory is shattered, my head as light as a pebble and my reason demented. Just look up here under my hair and see if I haven't a bump ; it hurts awfully. And I can't remember a thing, except that I must have got a tremendous blow from the back. I was calmly watching you sleep, and then this happened without my knowing how or why, upon my honour.''

'' Yes, indeed,'' cried Hillchopper, who was leaning over Flying Feather and blowing on his head to separate the hair. '' You've got a splendid bump, my noble friend ; you must have it bathed all day with warm wine, and to-morrow it will be gone.''

'' I'll bathe that dear, that darling, that divine bump for ten days, ten months, ten years ! Oh, my friends ! my friends ! if that blow had broken the bones, and laid bare my brain, I would still bless the unknown creature who dealt it. That mysterious stick must have broken that very thing in me which condemned me to fly. Well, my flying is over now ! A fig for the regions of the air ! And long live this good firm old earth ! ''

'' We will get to the bottom of this astounding attack,'' said Jack

Bruin. "Come on, my friends, let's explore this castle from attic to cellar. Now I am rested, and it's broad daylight, I wouldn't half mind meeting some enemy to speak to and stretch my arms against."

The whole day went by in vain searching, and at nightfall Oaktwister was told off to keep watch.

In the morning, when the others awoke, they found him stretched out full-length, with a still worse bump than the one which yesterday had adorned Flying Feather's head. But poor Oaktwister was less fortunate than his friend and gained nothing from the blow but a terrible headache. He was quite amazed, and could not give the slightest explanation of his strange wound.

The four friends went in vain up and down the castle, looking into every nook and cranny. They could find no trace of their mysterious enemy.

The third night it was Hillchopper's turn. They raised him up in just as piteous a condition as his friends.

"By Heaven," cried Jack Bruin, "I am most distressed at your bad luck, but I am delighted that it is my turn to keep watch to-night, for I'm just longing to tickle the ribs of the impudent beggar who has wrought you this harm."

The time came for Jack Bruin to take up his post. He slipped under the table and disappeared beneath the table-cloth, which hung down and hid him entirely. With his knife he made two holes in the stuff on a level with his eyes, and so, seeing without being seen, he waited.

Long moments went by. Nothing untoward had come to disturb his friends' peaceful sleep, and Jack Bruin was just beginning to get impatient of this long useless wait, when the twelve strokes of midnight sounded from a clock somewhere in the castle.

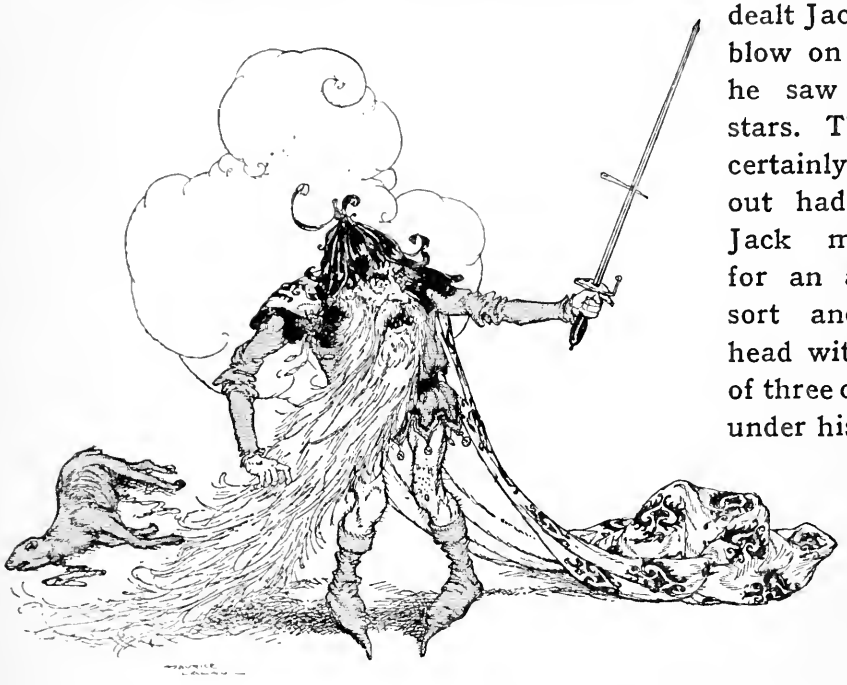
The last had hardly sounded when a secret door hidden in the tapestry moved slowly on its hinges. And before Jack Bruin's astonished eyes appeared the quaintest figure imaginable. It was a dwarf with legs twisted like vine-tendrils, and a face as wrinkled as a baked apple ; on his pointed chin he wore a beard so extremely long that it swept along the floor behind him. He had abnormally long arms, broad shoulders, a huge chest, and he carried a flayed sheep on his back. In his left

hand he carried a spit for roasting. He came forward walking stealthily on the tips of his misshapen toes, and he cast furtive glances around him.

Jack Bruin leapt towards him with a single bound.

"Good evening, you hideous little monkey," he cried. "What are you doing here at this time of night?"

For only answer the other treacherously brandished his spit and dealt Jack Bruin such a blow on the head that he saw ten thousand stars. The dwarf would certainly have laid him out had not the wily Jack made provision for an attack of that sort and padded his head with the feathers of three cushions stuffed under his cap.



All the same he staggered, but recovering his presence of mind at once:

"Gently, old gnome," he cried. "I'll teach you to greet folk of my condition in this fashion!"

He rushed at the dwarf, but the latter avoided him quickly, and began to go round the table, chuckling. When Jack Bruin came along one side, he escaped along the other. This chase lasted a long time. At last both the assailants were exhausted and stopped. Divided by the long oak board, they looked at each other in silence.

Jack Bruin was the first to speak.

"Well, what do you want here, anyway? Speak out, and I pro-

mise to forgive you the wrong you intended to do me if you satisfy my curiosity."

"That's what I call talking," answered the other, "and at last you've got reasonable. Know, then, my son, that the only reason for my coming here is to roast my sheep. Will you help me, and turn the spit?"

"Certainly. But spit your animal before coming near me. I'd rather have that implement safely in the sheep's inside than feel it descend on my head."

The dwarf spitted the sheep and placed it before the fire on the andirons in the tall fire-place.

"There, that's done," he said in a hypocritical voice. "Come along, my son, come along, my dear friend, and turn this spit so that our roast shall not be burnt."

Jack Bruin, having good cause to be suspicious, made no attempt to go up to him.

"The fact is," he said with a stupid look, "I don't know how to turn a spit. You show me how to do it, and I'll try and do like you."

The dwarf laughed at his simplicity.

"You great stupid," he said. "Look here; it's as easy as anything."

He sat down on the stool by the hearth and began to turn the spit.

Jack Bruin went a few steps forward and squatted down before the fire, pretending to be following the master's lesson most attentively. But his hands were at work behind the dwarf's back, and he picked up the end of his long beard, which was trailing on the ground, and tied it firmly three times round the heavy leg of the table.

"It's your turn now," said the horrid little man.

He got up, but when he felt he was held back by his beard he gave a cry of fury.

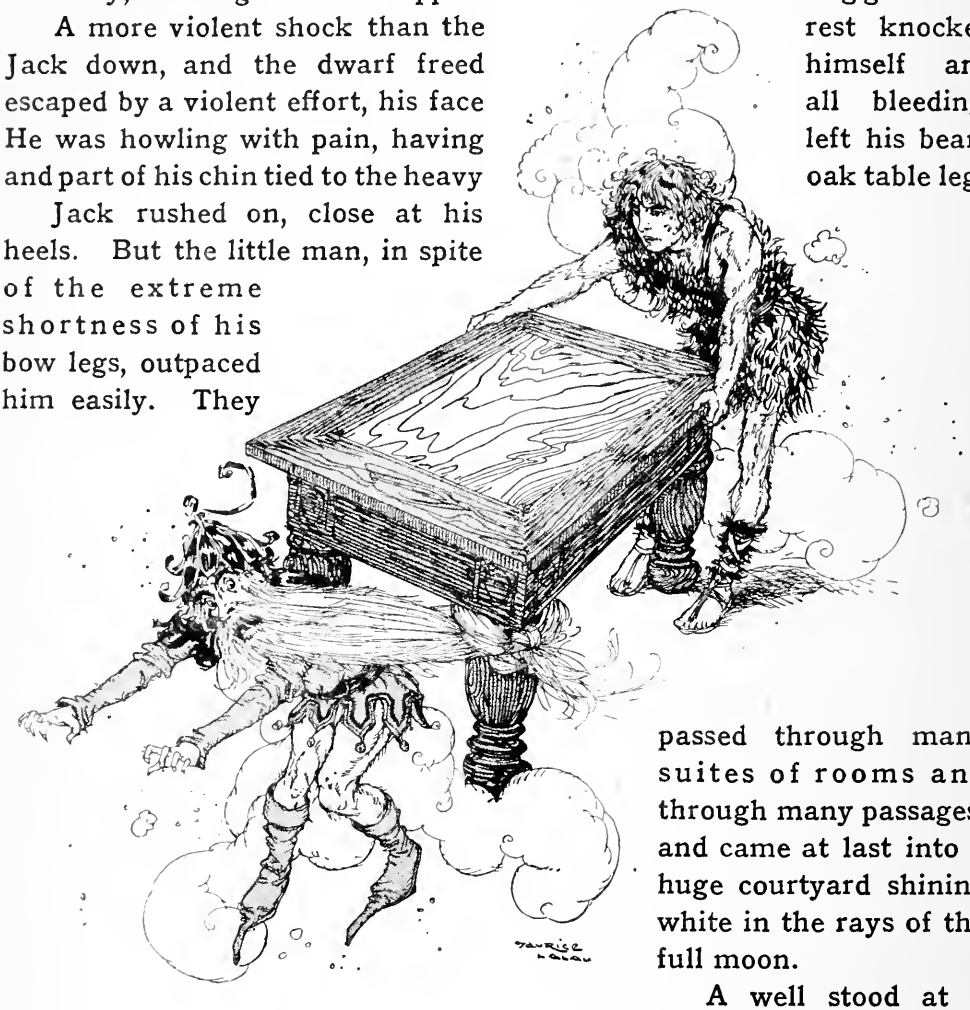
"Now, dwarf, it's between you and me, young fellow my lad!" exclaimed Jack Bruin triumphantly.

He prepared to spring at the dwarf's throat, but when the latter saw his intention he began to run away, dragging the table behind him on the end of his beard.

Jack went down on his hands and knees, clinging to the table; he pulled it towards him and the dwarf tugged it the opposite way, making the most appalling grimaces.

A more violent shock than the rest knocked Jack down, and the dwarf freed himself and escaped by a violent effort, his face all bleeding. He was howling with pain, having left his beard and part of his chin tied to the heavy oak table leg.

Jack rushed on, close at his heels. But the little man, in spite of the extreme shortness of his bow legs, outpaced him easily. They passed through many suites of rooms and through many passages, and came at last into a huge courtyard shining white in the rays of the full moon.



A well stood at a short distance away. The dwarf ran up to it, whistling a strange tune. Suddenly a gigantic eagle flew down from the sky, perched on the edge and spread its wings right out. In a moment the fugitive had set himself astride this original steed, and man and bird disappeared down the well.

Jack Bruin could not stifle a cry of rage and disappointment. He went up to the well and leant over the yawning opening, but he could see nothing.

Then he went round the courtyard, thinking over this astounding adventure, rubbing his eyes from time to time to make certain that he was not dreaming. He could find no explanation of the sudden disappearance of eagle and dwarf.

He went back to the well and picked up large paving-stones and threw them down. He listened eagerly for the crash when they hit the bottom. But the stones left his hands one by one and fell noiselessly into the darkness of the abyss. No echo, no sound rose to his ears—nothing. It was as though the hole led straight to the immeasurable depths of hell.

Then Jack Bruin went back thoughtfully. And although, in the excitement of the chase, he had not noticed the way he came, he found it easily by the large bloodstains left by his adversary.

He then returned to his friends, who were all sleeping peacefully.

He respected their slumbers and going to the chimney-corner sat down and spent the rest of the night wondering what all this might mean.

X

AS soon as his friends woke up Jack Bruin told them about his mysterious adventure of the night before. To support his remarks he showed them the dwarf's long beard, which still had a few fragments of flesh sticking to it. They were much surprised, and

reproached Jack most affectionately for not having called them to help him.

"Upon my soul," he said, "you were sleeping so peacefully that I didn't think it any good disturbing your rest; on the contrary, I'm very glad that that accursed dwarf's yells did not wake you up with a shock."

They decided to start off at once. They followed the blood-stains, and got to the court, where the well stood, without any check. They leant over it, but their eyes saw nothing but darkness upon darkness.

Flying Feather then lamented:

"Oh! fatal blow! How I regret not being able to fly now! I could have examined these mysterious depths from up there, but now, alas! what's the good of me any more?"

"Don't be unhappy, dear Flying Feather," said Jack Bruin; "you'd have to be as sharp-eyed as an owl to pierce the darkness of this hole, and if you went a hundred fathoms above it, you wouldn't see a thing!"

Then the four friends threw stones into the well and, leaning over it, they listened as Jack had done the night before: still no sound.

In great discouragement they sat down on the brink and each one meditated in silence.

"Look here," said Jack Bruin at last, "we shall never get to the bottom of this affair by sitting here with our arms folded. We must be up and doing, by Heaven! I'm going down this well, and I'll find out what's inside, even if it should cost me my life! It would be a nice thing if I dared not undertake what a nasty monkey of a dwarf did last night before my astonished eyes. If he's gone down, I must go too. Don't try and keep me back. Nothing worse than death can happen to me, and I'm not afraid to die."

In vain did the others try hard to dissuade him from his plan, assuring him that it was sheer madness; he would not give way. Nothing availed: neither reasoning nor prayers. They spoke one after the other, but without convincing him. Their wise remarks had no effect, but that of making this madman more determined still.

"I swear I'll go down, I tell you, in spite of you all!"

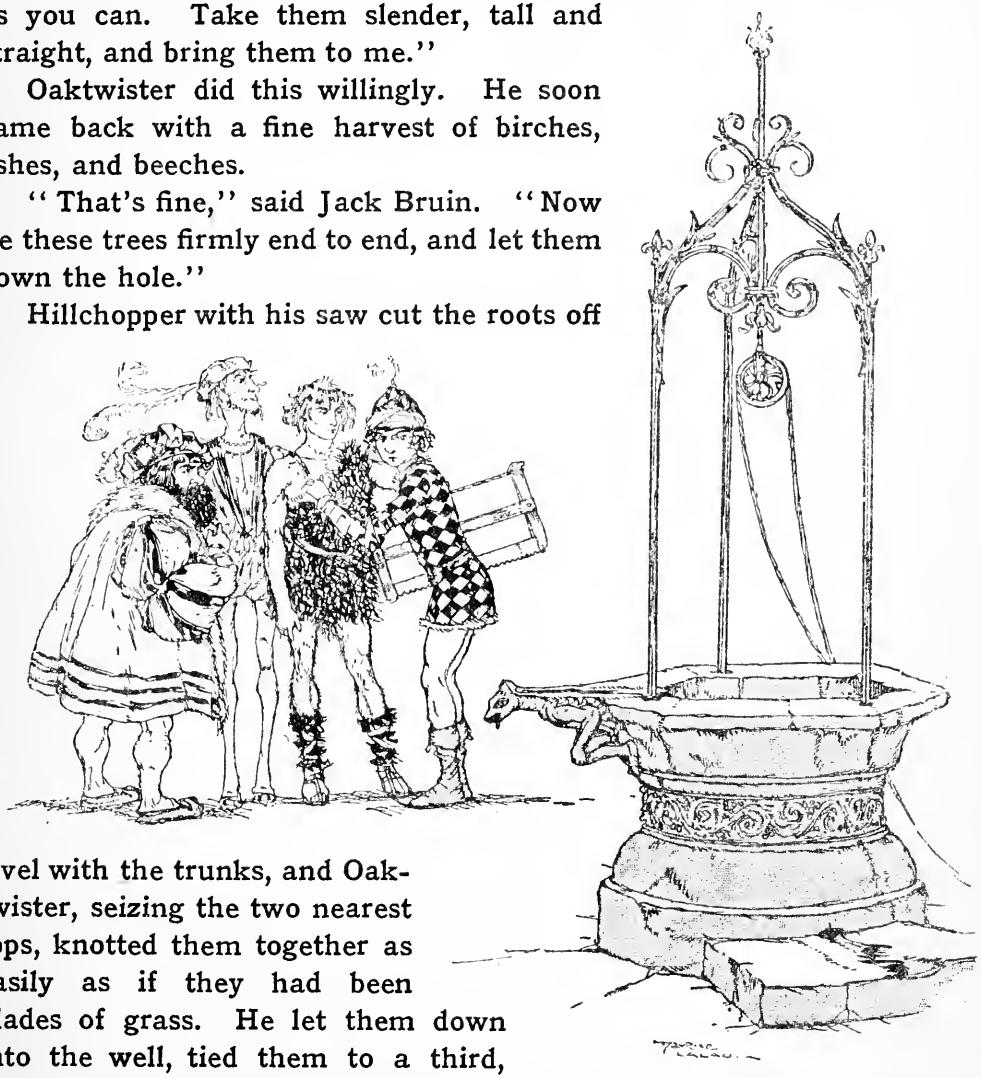
Then he concluded in an impatient tone :

"For the love of Heaven, spare me these lamentations. Here, Oaktwister, if you are on my side, go and pull up as many young trees as you can. Take them slender, tall and straight, and bring them to me."

Oaktwister did this willingly. He soon came back with a fine harvest of birches, ashes, and beeches.

"That's fine," said Jack Bruin. "Now tie these trees firmly end to end, and let them down the hole."

Hillchopper with his saw cut the roots off



level with the trunks, and Oaktwister, seizing the two nearest tops, knotted them together as easily as if they had been blades of grass. He let them down into the well, tied them to a third, and then to a fourth, and so on, gradually letting this strange mast deeper into the abyss.

Finally, after he had tied on a hundred and fifty in the same way,

he felt a resistance from below, and thought he must have reached the bottom ; and indeed, when he left go of the huge pole, it remained motionless as if it were resting on a solid base.

" Victory ! " cried Jack Bruin. " Look how patience overcomes every obstacle. Didn't I tell you that we should get to the bottom of that hole in the end, however deep it was ? "

He went up to the well, and tested the safety of the trees Oaktwister had tied end to end, and after staying a moment lost in thought, bending over the yawning hole, from which rose a fetid and nauseous sepulchral smell, he turned to his friends again :

" Now then," he said in a voice which he meant to be cheerful, " the time has come for me to part from you, my dear friends. I want to go down first. You three stay here and keep good watch. Wait seven whole days, and after that, if I haven't come back, it will be that I am dead or kept prisoner."

He hesitated, looked affectionately at his companions in adventure, and then finished suddenly :

" In that case, your hearts will tell you what to do : either to descend into the unknown horror of this mysterious well to save or avenge me, or take leave for ever of this place which will have become my grave."

" We swear to await you faithfully for seven whole days," cried his companions, raising their right hands. " We call God the Father to witness to this oath."

Then Oaktwister stepped forward and added gravely :

" And we also swear by God the Father, Christ His Son, and the most blessed Virgin Mary that we will follow you into this abyss after seven days have passed. We will find you, wherever you are. We would rather die a hundred times than return to the upper earth without Jack Bruin."

" We swear it," repeated Flying Feather and Hillchopper together.

" Farewell, my brothers," said Jack Bruin in a voice trembling with emotion. " Farewell."

He shook himself free from his friend's arms and while they, with tears in their eyes, were wishing him the best of luck, he ran towards the well.

And all the time he was slipping, slowly but surely

He climbed on to the edge, made a last signal of farewell, and, clinging to the trunk of the topmost tree, he let himself slide down into the pit.

He went down quickly, tearing his clothes on the edges of the stones and brushing by swarms of loathsome creatures on his way down.

Monstrous spiders, crouching at the edge of their lair, fixed their round phosphorescent eyes on him ; giant wood-lice swarmed, rounding their backs under their vile armour ; worms of an incredible length knotted their slimy coils around his ankles and enormous toads blew their foul breath into his face.

Braving all this vermin, the fearless Jack Bruin went on down.

High up above his head the sky looked like a tiny disc of light which got smaller and smaller as he went deeper.

Suddenly a horrible fear caused his brow to become wet with perspiration and his hair to stand on end. A cry of terror escaped from him, he had reached the end of his rope of trees, and now his legs were dangling down into empty space.

He felt the rough trunk slipping away inch by inch from under his clenched hands, and his body going slowly down too. Kicking out with his feet, he twisted and struggled madly, wearing himself out in frantic efforts to snatch himself from death, to haul up his gasping body, whose weight was dragging him down into the abyss.

He drove his nails into the wood. He fixed his teeth into the bark. Every part of his body that could grip, clutch or bite was exerted to its utmost to prevent such a dreadful fall.

And all the time he was slipping, slowly but surely.

Blood flowed from his torn hands, from his lips and gums which were pressed against the wood ; blood blinded his eyes and bespattered his face.

Jack Bruin was falling !

His hands still supported him : they opened, but closed again, gripping the narrow ledge of rock, that fatal support on which Oak-twister, thinking he had reached the bottom of the well, had planted his long pole.

Hanging to this stone with stiff arms, Jack Bruin cried out and

called ; his voice re-echoed from the walls and proclaimed his distress : the sound of it rose, but lost itself high up towards the shining point which was the sky. He listened. No sound but the swarming of the vermin against the walls.

Then he had a moment of revolt ; he had a last access of energy and rage : he wanted to live, though he knew it was impossible ; he wanted to live in spite of everything. He made a huge effort and pulled himself up : his joints cracked : his chin, his neck, and then his chest touched against the rock. But suddenly his strength failed him ; and he fell back inert, hanging by his wrists.

He was going to die. He wept. . . .

His limbs stiffened, his head fell on his breast, a dazzling light of swift visions flamed before his closed eyes. He was calling up radiant memories, dreaming a moment before the great sleep ; he saw pictures, colours, brightness in this tomb-like darkness. He saw the huge trees of his native forest, the she-bear, his father and mother, the faces of his companions in adventure ; then all this began to whirl dizzily about him. Then the ghastly darkness of the well reigned once again.

A delicious weariness came over him, as though his soul and body were falling asleep ; he closed his eyes and lost consciousness ; his hands opened, lost their grip, and he fell heavily into the pit. . . .

A loud noise of divided waters, a yawning gulf from which foamy jets spout up : a rain of drops pattering monotonously down ; and then silence. The waters close again ; the surface disturbed by ripples and furrowed by big rings moving quietly and peacefully towards the shore. . . . Jack Bruin had fallen into a deep lake !

His body came to life in the cold lapping of the waves, and struggled instinctively against drowning ; his arms and legs moved. At last the contact of the icy water with his body brought back his consciousness, and feeling himself sinking, he began to swim as hard as he could.

Soon his head was out of water. He opened his eyes ; and was dazzled by what he saw.

It was daylight all around him. A soft radiance coming from some

unknown spot open to the sky was shedding its exquisite brightness over a charming landscape. A castle stood on the edge of the lake, its marble base rising out of a soft verdant meadow which stretched as far as the horizon, where it was stopped by a high wall of rock. The whole place was enclosed in a huge grotto the ends of which could hardly be distinguished. The atmosphere in this vault was warm and pleasant :

no breath disturbed the air, which was heavy with the subtle perfume of the flowers that studded the lawns.

Jack Bruin breathed deeply. His blood flowed more vigorously and freely through his veins ; his eyes sparkled ; his limbs glowed with fresh energy. With long strokes he swam to the nearest point of the coast, and as soon as he landed he fell on his knees to give thanks to God for his deliverance.

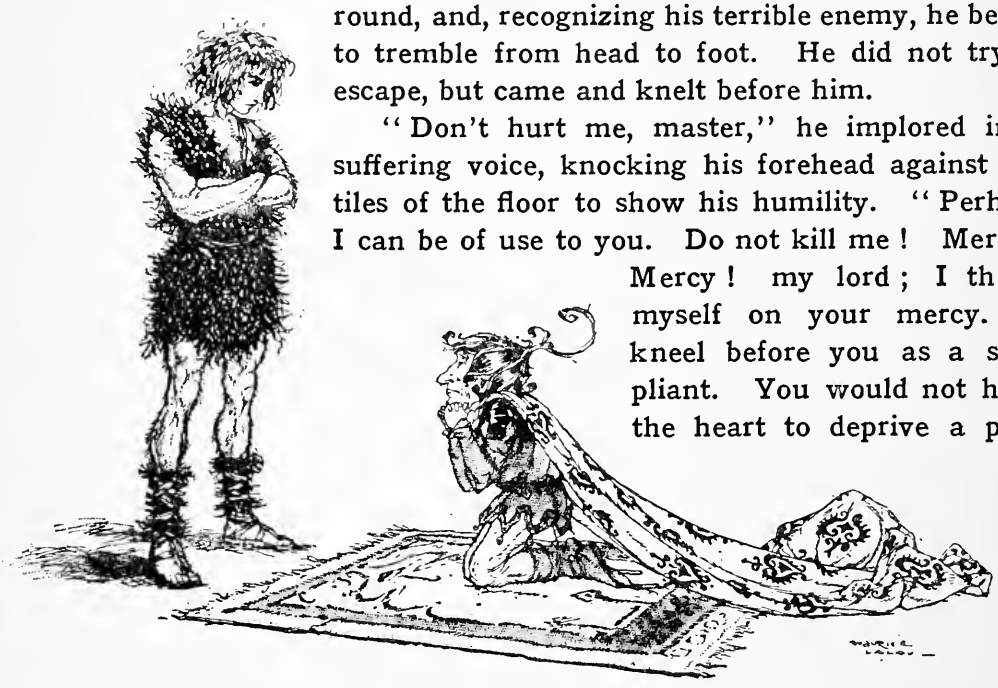
XI

AFTER resting for a few minutes the fearless Jack set out again, seeking for new adventures.

He walked up the steps of the castle, which seemed to be inhabited, pushed open the heavy door and entered a splendid room.

The first creature he met was the horrible dwarf of the previous day. He was crouching on the ground, moaning and groaning, and he had an ivory box before him, from which he took ointment to rub on his chin.

When he heard the noise made by Jack Bruin's entrance, he turned round, and, recognizing his terrible enemy, he began to tremble from head to foot. He did not try to escape, but came and knelt before him.



"Don't hurt me, master," he implored in a suffering voice, knocking his forehead against the tiles of the floor to show his humility. "Perhaps I can be of use to you. Do not kill me! Mercy! Mercy! my lord; I throw myself on your mercy. I kneel before you as a suppliant. You would not have the heart to deprive a poor creature of his life, a weak, infirm dwarf whom you could easily crush under the sole of your boot?"

"You did not speak after this fashion last night, my friend: I've had enough to make me suspicious of you. My bruised and burning head still reminds me of what you call your weakness. Would you mock me, hateful monster?"

"Alas! no, my dear lord. Know that my whole strength lay in my beard alone. When I lost it I lost at the same moment the strength which surprised you so much, and now I am as weak as a little child. Mercy! mercy! spare me!"

"Very well; I will believe you and spare your life—but in exchange

I insist on your serving me faithfully in whatever I choose to command you.''

On hearing these words, the dwarf got up, went to Jack Bruin and clasped his knees, thanking him warmly.

'' Oh, yes, I will serve you most faithfully, my lord. I am ready to bind myself by the most sacred oaths. From henceforth you are my only master. Speak, command me, and I will obey.''

'' Good,'' said Jack Bruin. '' Serve me loyally from this time forward, and if I am pleased with you I will reward you by giving you back your beard, which I keep on me as a glorious trophy.''

At these words the dwarf jumped for joy and began gambolling about the room, cutting a hundred capers which made Jack Bruin laugh till the tears came.

'' My lord,'' he cried when he had calmed his transports, '' I am yours, body and soul. What would I not do to get back my beloved beard ! Look here : I will begin to pay my debt of gratitude straight off and tell you what I know of this mysterious castle.''

He ran to a tall chair with a wrought back, and pushed it towards his new master, bowing and saying humbly :

'' Deign to be seated, my lord, for my story will be rather long, and it would not do for you to listen to me standing.''

Jack Bruin sat down. The dwarf squatted at his feet and after thinking for a few moments he began thus :

'' Know, my lord, that these walls hide four princesses of such dazzling beauty as has never been seen in the world before. The King, their father, lived more than a hundred years ago in the castle where you met me last night. He was a very good man, so fond of his daughters that he did the maddest things to give them pleasure. A smile from them filled him with delight, and he would have undertaken a hundred bloody wars to spare them a tear. Their life was spent in feasts, balls and amusements. When they were of an age to be married, the King invited all the young princes of the neighbourhood to his court. But the fame of their perfection had spread so far that lords came from all corners of the world. They arranged great tourneys which the princesses were to watch. They could choose the husbands

they liked best freely from among the handsomest and bravest princes.

"All the most valiant heroes of chivalry jousted for love of them. But they were so particular that the feasts went by without their having chosen a husband.

"It was then that the powerful enchanter, my master, heard of these matchless beauties. He decided to go and see them for himself. So he went to the castle, accompanied by his three brothers. They appeared in the lists, clothed in brilliant armour, and one by one they defied the knights who dared tilt against them.

"Then, in all the pride of their success, they went to ask the King for the hands of his daughters.

"But these last had no sooner seen their faces uncovered than they burst out laughing and declared that they would rather die than marry such ugly lords. One thought their mouths were too big, one, their hair too crisped, the third, their noses too crooked, and the fourth, their teeth too irregular. . . ."

The dwarf stopped speaking: he seemed to be thinking, to be calling up some vision.

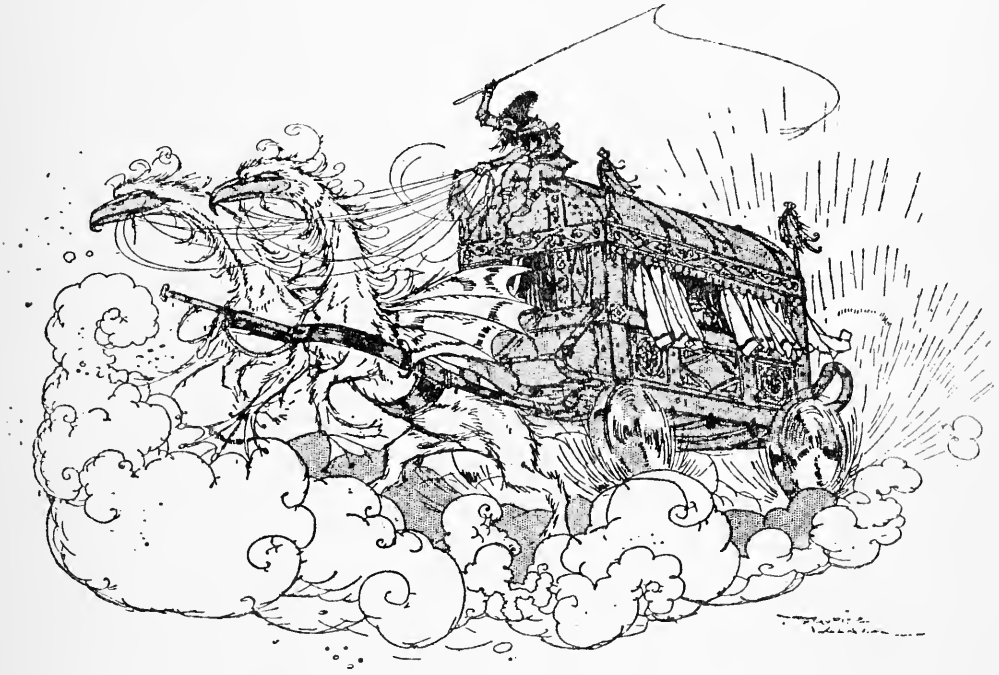
"Well," said Jack Bruin, "what happened to the four suitors? Come, speak, go on!"

"Forgive me, my lord," answered the little man, "for interrupting the thread of my story, but I was wondering to myself whether the enchanter my master and his three brothers were really and truly as ugly as the princesses made out. To tell you the truth, as far as I can remember their faces, they were neither better nor worse than their rivals, and I may add that their features were noble enough and that they really had nothing of the sorcerer about them. Only, there it was, they did not please: that was their one fault, their only failing.

"But to return to our story. The four spoilt princesses made fun of them so cruelly and so wittily that the whole court burst out laughing. Yes, they all roared with laughter, down to the youngest page: the ladies hid their faces behind their fans, the good King bit his moustache, and as for the rivals, they could laugh at their ease under their armour. Trembling with rage, the four brothers had great difficulty in bearing

the sneers of these mockers ; but if they contained themselves in their presence, it was only to show still greater pride when they left them.

" ' How, now, fair Sire,' they said to the King, ' did we come to your Court to serve as butts for the wit of your saucy jades ? You will pay dearly for this offence. Will you let us have your daughters ?—



yes or no ? If you refuse, we shall find a way to get them, whether they like it or not.'

" Offended at such language, the good King, speechless with rage, had them turned out by his archers, without listening to another word.

" The enchanter and his brothers left him with threats. The same night they seized the four princesses and took them to this underground castle. As for the poor King, their father, he very soon died of grief, for it was death to him to separate him from his daughters.

" After his death the magician, my master, scattered his servants, surrounded his castle with a formidable rampart, caused a moving forest to grow around it, and told off the dragon which you have

vanquished to guard the gates. . . . Yes, it must be a hundred years ago now."

"But," interposed Jack Bruin, "if I can calculate aright, these princesses of yours must be about a hundred and twenty; they must be horrible little old wizened, crotchety women by now."

"Not at all, my lord; they will always remain young, for during the period of their enchantment time passes by without affecting them. Every three months the enchanter comes to visit them, with his three brothers. And in spite of prayers and threats they have not yet been able to induce them to accept them as husbands. The poor girls, knowing that the enchanter's cruelty caused the death of their dear father, prefer to remain shut up for ever rather than consent to so hateful a marriage."

"By Heaven!" cried Jack Bruin with a fine movement of enthusiasm, "you must confess that the magician, your master, is a downright rascal to torment these four innocent creatures like this. And since chance has brought me here, I will go and deliver them this very moment."

"Gently, master, gently," answered the dwarf. "Do you think it's so easy to reach the noble prisoners? Let me tell you of one of the obstacles that you must first overcome. The four sisters are shut up in four separate rooms. The first is in a silver room, the second in one of silver gilt, the third in a room of gold, and the fourth, who is the youngest and more beautiful than all the rest, lives in a diamond room. Before the doors of their dwellings a horrible eight-headed dragon keeps watch; he is covered with scales all over and is quite invulnerable, except at the heart, where he must be pierced by a single blow if you would kill him. What is behind the silver room I don't know, but I've heard that after passing the eldest princess you have to break still more powerful enchantments to reach her younger sister. As for me, I am here as shepherd of the castle and also the cook."

"And what do you do?" asked Jack Bruin.

"My lord, I look after the flock of black and white sheep which grazes in the neighbouring meadow. Every morning I give two to the dragon, who eats them up without leaving a tuft of wool. Then every evening

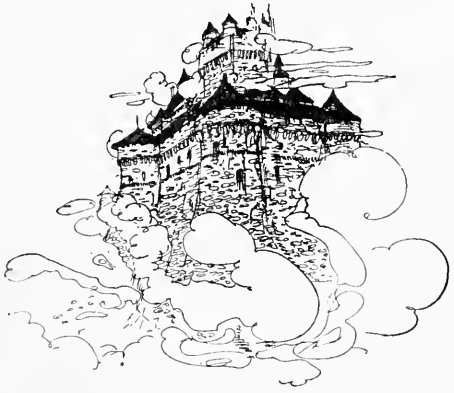
I take one up there into the old palace of the late King, where I have to cook it on the spit, for there is neither fire nor fireplace down here. To get out of this grotto I have an eagle to help me out of the well : but I have to be very careful to take up two animals every time, one to cook and one to feed the bird. Indeed, at every flap of his wings he turns his head round to me and I have to fill his beak with meat. If not, after giving three cries, he would throw me off his back and I should be hurled into the same lake whence you escaped so marvellously. The eagle wants no food for going down, for it is only the ascent which tires him, and I assure you that a fat sheep is only just enough to satisfy his hunger then.

" That is all I know, my lord. I now humbly await your orders."

" Have you fed the dragon yet to-day ? " asked Jack Bruin, after a few moments' thought.

" No, master ; I was preparing to do so when you came."

" Well, I have an idea. Show the way to the monster, and I will attack him at once."



XII

JACK BRUIN and the dwarf went first to the pasture, where the latter chose two fat ewes. Jack seized a huge black ram, cut its throat, took off its feet and skinned it very neatly.

Then he took off his clothes and wrapped himself in the fleece, which was still warm.

He fixed the animal's head, which he had left hanging to the skin, on his own, and then, crossing the flaps of the hide over his face and neck, he tied them firmly.

Then he went down on all-fours, and after walking a little and bleating once or twice, he began laughing, and asked the astounded dwarf :

" Well, what do you say to my disguise ? Do I make a pretty good ram like this ? "

" Upon my soul, the illusion is perfect from here, master. That strange fur with which God has seen fit to cover your body matches the black wool of the fleece very well, except that your own coat is shorter and coarser. The head fits quite well on your shoulders, and if I did not know you were a man I should certainly take you, not for a ram, perhaps, but for some monstrous and deformed woolly creature."

" Now then, for the dragon," said Jack Bruin, and, keeping the knife which the dwarf used for killing his charges in his right hand, he followed the two ewes.

They came to a huge courtyard where the monster was slumbering, with his eight heads resting on his formidable taloned feet. His body was covered with thick scaly armour, and he had a huge tail with twisted coils.

When he caught sight of his victims he gave a long howl of satisfaction, and then got up and opened his eight mouths with a terrible grinding of the teeth. Then Jack Bruin, on all-fours behind the ewes, could distinguish his belly, which was amber-yellow, rather like that of a salamander.

He saw at once where he must strike to reach the heart.

The dragon came forward, walking bear-fashion and waddling along on his massive hind-quarters.

Motionless with terror, the ewes, remained standing stupidly without even trying to escape. Jack was waiting behind them.

The monster, delighted at having three morsels to devour, decided first of all to swallow the two first and to keep the biggest for dessert : he did not worry about the last at all, being certain that it could not escape him. His claws descended on the ewes, but at the very moment

when they fell on them Jack Bruin leapt forward, and at one blow thrust his knife up to the hilt into the dragon's heart. A flood of black and

nauseous blood welled from the wound. The creature rolled over on his side. His eight heads were stretched out motionless. His claws relaxed. He moved no more.

Jack took the fleece off his face and tied it round his loins, and

returned, all blood-stained, to the dwarf, who congratulated him on his master-stroke.

"Now you've only got to knock three times at that door opposite, my lord, and the silver princess will open to you."

"You stay here," answered Jack Bruin, "I will send her out to you, and you must take her up to the top of the well on the eagle's back. There you will find my friends, and you must give her into their keeping. Then tell them where I've been and what I've been doing, and don't forget to greet them all from me. Then you must come down for the second and then the third princess, for I do not despair of releasing them all to-day. As for the fourth, I will bring her up to the light of day myself."

"Very well, master," said the dwarf.

Jack went up to the door the dwarf had shown him, and knocked three times.

What was the surprise of the fair princess when, on opening the door, she beheld a human face—the first she had seen for a hundred years!

"Fair Princess," said Jack, "you are free. Hasten to leave this accursed palace. My dwarf is waiting outside to take you to a safe place. Now show me the way to the princess in the silver-gilt room."

The young maiden kissed her deliverer's hands passionately. She took him into a room where everything was of silver, even the hangings on the walls. She offered him something to drink, and hastily collected all her valuables in a coffer—plate, dresses and jewels: all were of silver.

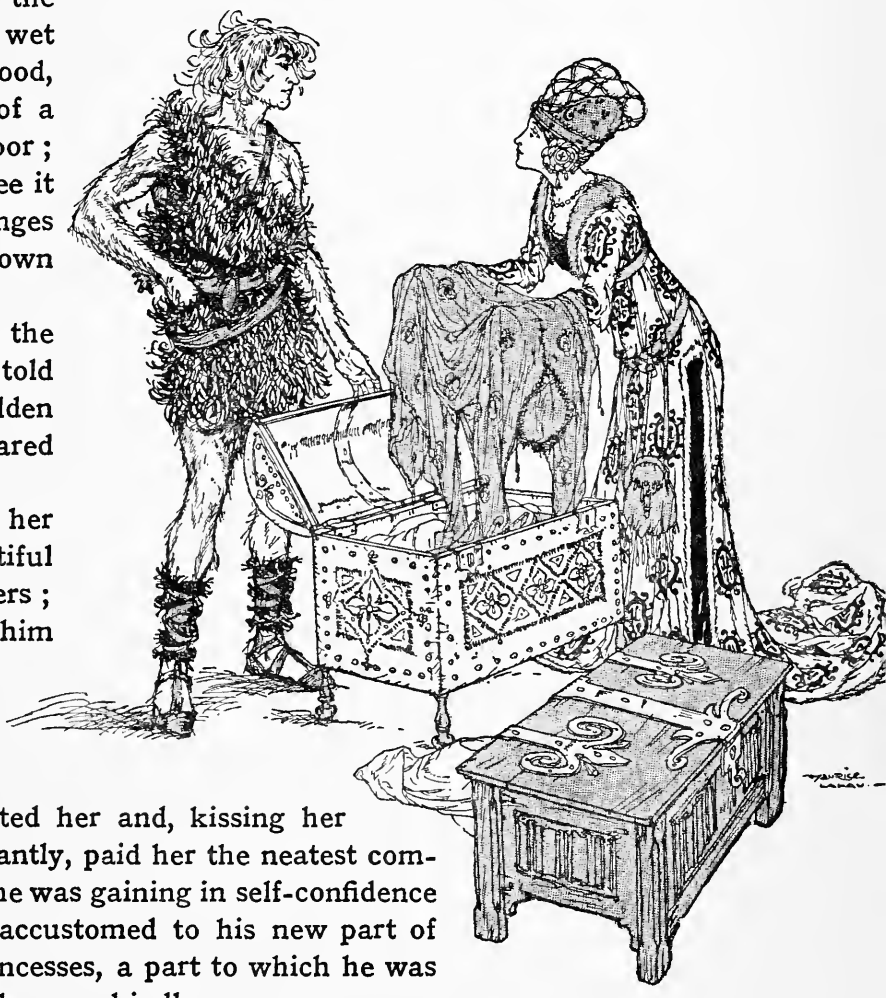
"To get to my sister," she said, "you must pull a tooth out of each of the mouths of the monster you've just slain; that will be eight teeth altogether. Then all you've got to do is to touch with each of them each of the eight nails on the door of her room, and then it will turn on its hinges and open of its own accord. Farewell, noble lord, and good luck to you. May Heaven keep you!"

After thanking him most warmly again, she went off with the dwarf.

Jack Bruin soon set the silver-gilt princess free by the method told him.

When she left him, loaded with her wealth, she drew a long pin from her hair and gave it to him.

"To reach the golden princess," she said, "plunge this in your arm and when the point is all wet with your blood, trace the sign of a cross on the door; then you will see it turn on its hinges and open of its own accord."



Jack did as the young maiden told him, and the golden princess appeared before him.

He found her still more beautiful than her sisters; she thanked him most feelingly and wished to throw herself at his feet. But he prevented her and, kissing her hand most gallantly, paid her the neatest compliments. For he was gaining in self-confidence as he became accustomed to his new part of deliverer of princesses, a part to which he was beginning to take very kindly.

Like her sisters, she put all her precious possessions, which were of solid gold, into a coffer. Then, just as she was taking leave of her deliverer, she gave him a garment so fine that it seemed to be woven of spiders' webs.

"Take this garment, my lord," she said, "and do not fail to put it on when you leave this place, for you must pass through a wall of flame before reaching the pavilion where my younger sister is shut up. Thanks to this magic garment you can go through the flames without being burned. Then prepare to fight a terrible giant who can only be wounded by Flamboyarde, the magic sword. This is hanging in a sapphire niche just behind the wall of flames. But whatever you do, do not touch it, for you would fall down dead on the spot. If you do not want it to kill you, there is only one thing you can use."

"What is that?" asked Jack Bruin.

"It is the white beard of the dwarf who looks after the castle sheep," she answered. "But oh! my lord, that dwarf is quite the most treacherous, the most——"

Jack Bruin interrupted:

"In that case the sword is mine, for I have vanquished the dwarf. And, madam, here is his beard, which I kept in memory of my triumph!"

"Heaven be praised!" cried the young maiden. "Now all you must do is to wrap the beard round your right hand and seize hold of Flamboyarde fearlessly; it can do you no harm. Farewell, and be of good courage."

Jack Bruin passed through a long passage and came out into a garden where all the trees, flowers, and grass were dried up. A lofty wall of flames rose before his eyes and gave out an intolerable heat.

The young man wrapped himself in the garment and walked boldly towards the flames. He went through them without feeling anything but a pleasant warmth.

Then, behind the circle of fire, he saw the sapphire niche where Flamboyarde was hanging.

He wrapped his hand in the magic beard and was able to take the sword quite safely.

It was made of a single diamond carved into a blade, and it had a ruby handle and an emerald guard.

Jack had just taken it in his hand when the giant appeared. His head was so high up that you could hardly see it. His shoulders looked

" Your great hulking mass doesn't frighten me "

like mountains ; his calves, as big as great turrets, ended in horrible feet which were of a proportionate length and breadth.

A voice which seemed to fall from the skies shouted, echoing into the far distance like a thunderclap :

" Who is this impudent pigmy who dares to venture here ? Where is he, that I may crush him under my boot like a millet seed ? "

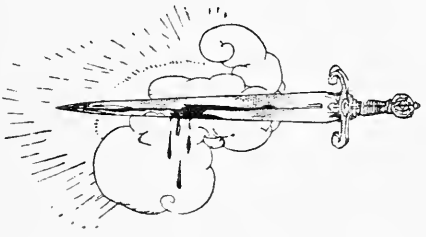
" Here I am. I am Jack Bruin, and your great hulking mass doesn't frighten me in the least," answered the young man fearlessly.

With these words he raised Flamboyarde and aimed a formidable blow at the giant's foot.

Marvellous to relate, hardly had the blade touched the monster's flesh than it cut through it like a pat of butter.

The giant tottered, and fell, with his foot cut off at the ankle. He hit the ground violently, with a noise that deafened Jack Bruin for a few minutes. When his body was stretched out full-length it covered so great a distance that our hero was obliged to run three leagues before he reached his enemy's chest and plunged Flamboyarde in up to the hilt.

At last he returned to the pavilion, and, all bespattered with blood, he boldly entered the house where the diamond princess was kept imprisoned.



XIII

JACK BRUIN passed through many rooms, and came at last to the diamond chamber.

There a princess was sitting on a topaz stool. She was singing sadly and accompanying herself on a lute whose strings were of gold and its body of yellow tortoise-shell.

When he saw her, Jack remained as though thunderstruck.

She was inconceivably beautiful, and he was so affected that he fell on his knees. Then he clasped his hands as though he were in the presence of a sacred image. He waited till she had finished her song, for she had not heard him come in, and when the lute had sighed out its last chord, he spoke timidly. Still on his knees, he told her in that humble position that he had come to set her free.

The exquisite princess went forward to raise him, but he was so covered with blood, sweat and dust that he begged her not to touch him for fear of soiling her little hands.

"Alas! madam," he said, "I feel I am most unworthy of the signal honour shown to me by Heaven in allowing me to go through a thousand dangers to save you from the cruel enchanter. I have already set your sisters free, who await you in safety with my three faithful friends. Would it please you to come with me, and I will take you to them?"

He said these words in so tender and respectful a tone that the princess was touched. Certainly her deliverer was not of the sort she

had expected. This man, barely clad, as furry as an animal and covered with sweat and blood, offended her very much. During her long imprisonment she had given free rein to her imagination and had read so many fairy-tales in which charming princes with their hats in their hands appeared in shining garments to deliver the fair unknown lady, that she certainly expected something better than Jack Bruin. But as she had a kind heart and was a sensible girl, she could not help wishing this brave warrior well.

"Come, my lord," she said with a ravishing smile, which put the finishing touch to his bewitchment, "I commit myself to your valiant care."

They went off.

Jack Bruin walked beside his fair princess and could not admire her enough. He nearly got lost five or six times going out of the pavilion, so bewildered was he. When they reached the threshold of the house, they found it swimming in the blood shed by the giant; this formed a lake which came up to Jack's knees.

As the young maiden did not like to venture into this horrible red sea with her white satin slippers and fine silk stockings, Jack offered to carry her to where they could walk dry-shod once more. She accepted, caught up her dress round her delicate ankles with a pretty gesture, and abandoned herself with a smile to her deliverer's arms.

While he was walking in this way, reverently carrying his precious and beloved burden, she was examining him curiously and thought he looked very noble, with his fine black eyes, his pure brow and the glossy waves of his hair. So it was not without a certain feeling of regret that she felt herself placed once more on dry land on the further side of the gory lake: she liked the shelter of that strong breast so well that she would willingly have lain still longer in his arms.

They passed through the wall of fire, which divided of itself to let them go by, and crossing the rooms of gold, of silver-gilt and of silver, they finally reached the court where lay the dragon's huge body.

There again a stream of blood had to be crossed.

With a pretty and natural gesture the little princess clasped her

frail arms around the neck of her guide, who was delighted at his good luck.

She looked at the dead monster with a grimace of disgust and terror, then her eyes returned admiringly to the young hero's features: she

found him decidedly handsome, and rejoiced at the bottom of her heart.

The eagle awaited them at the brink of the lake, in front of the castle.

Jack ran to the flock, chose the fattest sheep, killed it and went to take his place by his companion on the bird's back, holding out a piece of meat.

The eagle shook its feathers and flew up into the gloomy darkness of the well.

At every flap of its wings it turned its head, and Jack gave it its gory beakful.

They ascended slowly. The journey seemed endless to Jack, who was eager to get up to daylight to examine his beloved's face at his leisure : the darkness hid her from his sight.

Suddenly, when they had gone up about three-fourths of the way, Jack realized that there was only just enough meat for ten or twelve beakfuls.

He grew pale.

" Madam," he said quickly, his heart beating with anguish, " soon I shall have no more to give to the eagle, who no doubt finds our double weight too much for him and is going up much more slowly than usual. A few more flaps of his wing, and we are lost. But listen, madam, for I am going to die, and the moments are precious. Now that death is about to part me from you for ever, I feel brave enough to confess to the mad love which I have dared to feel for you from the first moment I set eyes on you. Forgive me, madam, but you are so beautiful ! You could never have accepted a creature such as I, could you ? So it is better for me to get it over straight away. Come, poor Jack Bruin, that's enough talk ! Farewell, madam, farewell. I am going to throw myself down the well, and the bird will get up quicker without my weight."

The diamond princess threw her arms round the young man's shoulders and, clinging to him, she cried :

" Stop, my dear lord ! No, no, you must not do it. If you jump into that abyss you will drag me with you. I love you too, and I swear that if you die I will die with you. Stay with me, I beseech you, and let us die together. Alas, alas ! must I indeed, young as I am, renounce the joys of love ? Ah, dear lord, how happily I should have lived with you up there in God's fair sunshine. . . .

As she finished speaking the eagle, having devoured his last beakful, turned his head and gave a hoarse cry. The young maiden clung more closely to Jack who, dazed and lost in an infinite sea of joy, seemed to forget the horror of their position. He covered his beloved's fingers with kisses.

For the second time the bird gave his savage cry.

"The eagle! the eagle!" cried the young maiden in a tone of unspeakable terror.

Jack Bruin started.

"The eagle!" he repeated, as though he had just woken from a dream.

He shook his head and reaching down with his hand which held the knife, he sought a place on his own body, pressed on the blade, cut into the flesh and held out a quivering morsel to the bird.

The dreadful beak opened and shut, and with a strong flap of the wings the bird flew upwards.

They ascended slowly. . . .

When they reached daylight Jack Bruin's body was one terrible wound.

He gazed on his dear princess's face in the bright sunlight, murmured, "How fair she is!" and, stretching out his arms to his friends, with a last effort, he fainted, unable to endure the pain any longer.

All hastened round, but the dwarf pushed them gently aside.

"Do not despair, masters," he said, "and leave him to me."

He took from his coat the same ivory box from which he had taken the ointment which had healed his chin; he took out a lump as big as a walnut and moulded it between his palms. Then he anointed the wounded man on all his sores, which under the marvellous action of the drug closed up immediately. Better still! wherever the astonishing preparation touched the young man's skin the latter became soft and lost its hideous bear's fur.

When Jack came to himself he was most astonished to see the pleasant change which had transformed his whole body.

He at once gave the dwarf back his long white beard, and almost suffocated him with embraces.

Then, as the princess's three sisters seemed to get on excellently with his three friends, he politely entreated them to consent to accept them as husbands.

The four weddings took place the same day, and each was thinking of setting off for the kingdom which his wife brought him as her dowry.

Accordingly they separated with great regret; they swore eternal friendship and embraced each other tenderly. And the four new monarchs made one another a solemn promise to meet at least once a year to celebrate the anniversary of their fourfold happiness in merry feasting.

Finally they set off for their respective empires.

Flying Feather, with the silver princess, went north.

Hillchopper, with the silver-gilt princess, went east.

Oaktwister, with the golden princess, went west.

Jack Bruin watched them go, and waved his cap; his wife let her white silk scarf flutter about in the wind.

The three friends turned round, crying, "Till we meet again!"

The three princesses kissed their pink fingertips to their youngest sister.

At a turn in the road they disappeared, after a last signal of farewell.

Then Jack Bruin put his arms round his beloved diamond princess.

"Dearest," he said, "would you like your husband to take you to his parents? Somewhere far from here I have an old father and mother whom I long to see again."

"Come, dear lord and master," she said with a gentle smile, "I am your humble servant. I want nothing now, since I have you. We love one another—what does our kingdom matter? Our subjects can wait. They must have got used to it by now, after hoping for my

return for nearly a hundred years. Let us start. I long to embrace your parents.''

League by league, travelling by short stages, the two happy lovers arrived one fine night at the forest where Jack was born.

Summer had studded the thick moss in the glades with little flowers. The warm air was laden with perfume, and the moon, watching above them in the pale night, sent her gentle silver rays down through the tree-tops.

Jack led his companion through the old familiar paths to his parents' hut.

They went up to the door and looked at each other, smiling. They were both thinking of the joy they were bringing to the good people asleep within those walls, perhaps dreaming of their child.

The diamond princess raised her white hand: her little fingers tapped against the door, '' tap ! tap ! ''

'' Father ! Mother ! Open quickly ! We are your dear children,'' they said together.

The door opened wide, and in the forest hush a loud cry of joy rang out:

'' Jack ! my darling son ! my Jack, can it be you ? ''

'' Yes, it is I, Mother.''

The wood-cutter's wife was laughing and crying in her son's arms. And the wood-cutter was looking at the princess with all his eyes, for, bathed in the moonlight, she looked like some beautiful fairy.

The general rejoicing can easily be imagined. No one slept that night in the little log hut.

The next day at dawn Jack went out alone, with great secrecy. He went towards the mother-bear's den. He found her just waking up. Solemnly rolled up in a furry ball, she was just opening her kind eyes to the first rays of sunshine.

When she saw her nursling, she leapt two or three times into the air for joy.

'' Can it be you, my son ? '' she said, in bear language. '' I am so glad to see you.''

Jack told her his adventures.

She listened, nodding her great head, and regretted very much that her adopted son had lost his fine coat. Then, when he finished by offer-

ing to take her to his palace, where he would make her a purple and golden den, she answered :

" No, no, my son ; I will stay in my dear forest. You see, Jack Bruin, I am getting old, and at my age it's not easy to change one's habits. I was born here, and I hope to die here in good time, unless some huntsman's arrow cuts me off before. And, besides, you men, in spite of all your knowledge and skill, couldn't ever find out what a bear's idea of happiness is. So keep your presents, and don't worry about me.

" Good-bye. I want nothing from you but a little place in your heart. Be happy. You are a brave man, and on the honour of a bear I am proud of you."

A few days later, Jack Bruin, with his parents and his wife, left their leafy hut for the diamond princess's kingdom, where they arrived safely, after a happy journey.

Jack was proclaimed King, and governed wisely for the good of his subjects. His parents did not leave him, and soon becoming grandmother and grandfather, they dandled on their knees grandchildren who were as pink-and-white as their father had been furry at their age.

As for the white-bearded dwarf, as I do not know where he came from, I cannot tell you where he went.

THE LITTLE MAN IN THE HAYSTACK

THE LITTLE MAN IN THE HAYSTACK

I

ONCE there lived a King and Queen who had but one daughter. She was called Lilyrose because of her white skin and red lips. Her parents idolized her and thanked Heaven a hundred times a day for having given them so accomplished a child; for although she was only six years old she could already say

the most charming things, and she smiled at every one so prettily that it was impossible not to love her.

Now on one June day, Lilyrose was sitting at her window, looking out into the country.

Behind her her governess, a good lady of the Court, as clever as a professor but as round as a tub and as fat as a goose, had just fallen asleep, lying in her high-backed ornamented chair. She had let her lace-work fall on her lap and, overcome by the heat, which was making the grasshoppers dance and sing in the fields, she was just beginning to snore, her head falling forwards and her nose nearly touching her four-fold chin.

Outside, the King's haymakers were at work in the hay. A strong scent rose from the ground, and carried by the breeze, came and caressed the little princess's cheeks.

"How nice it smells!" she said to herself. "And how lovely it would be to walk among all those delicious scents . . . but the thing is that I mayn't go out alone. Oh, dear! it's no fun being a King's daughter."

She sighed deeply; and seeing a peasant woman passing below, with her hair flying in the wind and a song on her lips, she added:

"How lucky that woman is to be able to go where she likes in the sun, without dragging a troublesome waiting-woman after her who's so fat that she can't walk a step without melting away."

With these words she turned to her governess. But, seeing her asleep, she jumped for joy and would have clapped her hands if she had not been afraid of waking her.

She slipped away from the window and went to the door; then, lifting her long dress with the tips of her fingers, she showed the points of her satin slippers and bowed ceremoniously, making the sleeper two or three comical curtsies and saying under her breath, in a pretty, laughing voice:

"Ha! ha! you are asleep, madam. I wish you sweet repose! And may Heaven spare you bad dreams! I am going to profit by your drowsiness to venture my august person out of doors. Do not

worry, madam ; I shall soon be back again. Your servant, madam ; your servant ! ''

And she ran away with quick, mischievous steps.

She ran down the stairs four steps at a time, crossed the courtyard and passed over the draw-bridge. The guards watching at the castle gates lowered their pikes when she came by, and the officer knelt on one knee.

Lilyrose greeted them with a smile, and then, running on with her little short steps, she escaped into the country.

She walked on for some time, came to the end of the park and at last reached the open space and the fields where the haymakers were working.

Lilyrose stopped and looked with all her eyes.

The scythes came and went, shining in the sun and moving like lightning through the grass. White butterflies fluttered around, as light and capricious as thistledown : there were no birds to be seen, but you could hear them twittering in the branches of the willows, and the air was full of the swish of the stalks falling under the steel, the chink of the blades being sharpened by one of the peasants and the mad, deafening song of the grasshoppers drunk with light.

Lilyrose could not weary of listening to it all. Finally, attracted by a cool stream which ran close by and whose peaceful water she could see winding through an avenue of alders, she went towards it.

She walked slowly along its banks, delighting in the darting fishes and the lightning flight of the dragon-flies. From time to time she would bend down and smile at her own image, which was reflected in a frame of water-lilies, irises and marsh plants.

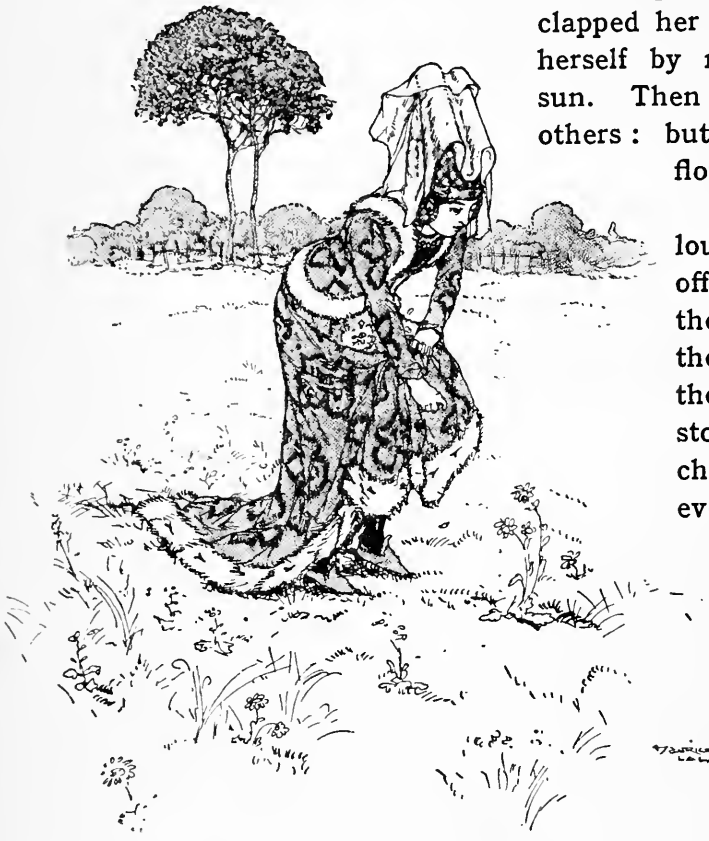
She was unconsciously going further and further from the castle. After an hour she came to a sort of glade surrounded by silver willows.

In the middle of a newly-cut field there was a haystack which was giving out so delicious a perfume that Lilyrose went up to it to breathe its fragrance from close by.

'' Oh, dear ! what lovely flowers ! '' she cried.

A cloud of daisies, buttercups and bindweed lay before her at the foot of the haystack.

She bent down, stretched out her hand and seized a daisy's delicate stem : but hardly had she touched it when she gave a cry of delight. The little flower was a wonderfully worked jewel. It had a green-gold stem, an emerald calyx, a topaz middle and diamond petals !



She picked it, jumped for joy, clapped her hands, and then amused herself by making it glitter in the sun. Then she bent down to the others : buttercups, bindweed, corn-flowers, all were jewels.

Fashioned with marvellous art, they stood there offering to Lilyrose's gaze the lustre of their pearls, the glitter of their enamel, the fire of their precious stones and their finely-chased metals ; there was every precious thing that the earth hides within her.

The little princess was astounded at the sight.

" My father," she thought, " has nothing, however valuable, among his treasure that can compare with the simplest of these flowers. A bunch of these would buy all the kingdoms of the earth."

She twisted them daintily in her fingers, put them together according to their different colours, and then separated them again to admire each one by itself. She remained a long time in a transport of delight ; but the sun was sinking and the sky was stained with crimson.

" Heavens ! it is evening," cried Lilyrose. " I shall be scolded

"Stop thief! Stop thief!"


MAURICE
WAHAU

for running away. But I'll pick so many of these lovely flowers that they will be sure to forgive me."

She lifted her skirt, knelt down and began filling her lap with daisies, buttercups, bindweed and cornflowers.

" How heavy they are," she said, getting up.

And, quite weighed down by them, she started back to the castle, whose weathercocks she could see in the distance over the alder grove.

She had hardly gone three steps when an angry voice shouted behind her :

" Stop thief ! stop thief ! "

She turned round in confusion, and saw a grey-bearded dwarf who, coming out of the haystack, was running towards her with huge strides. He had a very wicked and ugly face, bow-legs, long arms, and he wore a rich diamond crown on his head ; in his hand he brandished a sceptre topped by an immense pearl.

She was so frightened that she dropped her precious harvest at once, and turned to run away. But the little man stopped her, seizing hold of the train of her dress.

" Thief ! thief ! " he cried. " Hasn't your father got enough jewels for you that you come and steal mine ? Who said you could pick these flowers ? I declare, these kings' daughters think they can do anything ! You'll pay dearly for your theft."

Lilyrose answered, trembling, in a tearful voice :

" I'm very sorry, Mr. Dwarf ; I didn't know these flowers were yours. I'll give them back. Here they are ; but don't hurt me."

She flung herself on her knees.

" Indeed, my beauty, you think you'll get off lightly ! Let me tell you that I am the King of the Hay, and that this glade where you wandered belongs to me. You wanted to steal my flowers : it's my turn now. I've got you, and I am going to keep you, or, rather steal you, as a certain little girl wanted to steal poor innocent flowers, do you see ? "

With these words, he stretched out his sceptre towards Lilyrose, who was at once fixed to the ground by some irresistible force. She

could not flee nor make a movement, but remained kneeling, raising imploring eyes to the dwarf.

"Now then, come with me, my beauty; I'm going to shut you up and keep you in my tower a hundred leagues from here. You shall marry my son, the Prince of the Hay, when he is old enough. He is nearly ten, and you are six: you will be a well-matched couple."

Having spoken thus, the King of the Hay seized Lilyrose and dragged her off, in spite of her tears.

The haystack opened for them, and then closed after them. They disappeared.

II

EVERY ONE was terribly upset at the palace when they discovered Lilyrose's disappearance. The governess was the first to give the alarm, and rushed in tears to throw herself at the Queen's feet. The latter gave loud cries and fell down in a faint. The King had his horse saddled, called out his guards and divided them up into groups which went off in all directions to search the neighbourhood. He himself set off at a gallop across the fields, calling "Lilyrose! Lilyrose!" at the top of his voice.

They stopped all the tramps; they searched all the cottages; they explored the park and the fields, and they dragged the stream. All in vain!

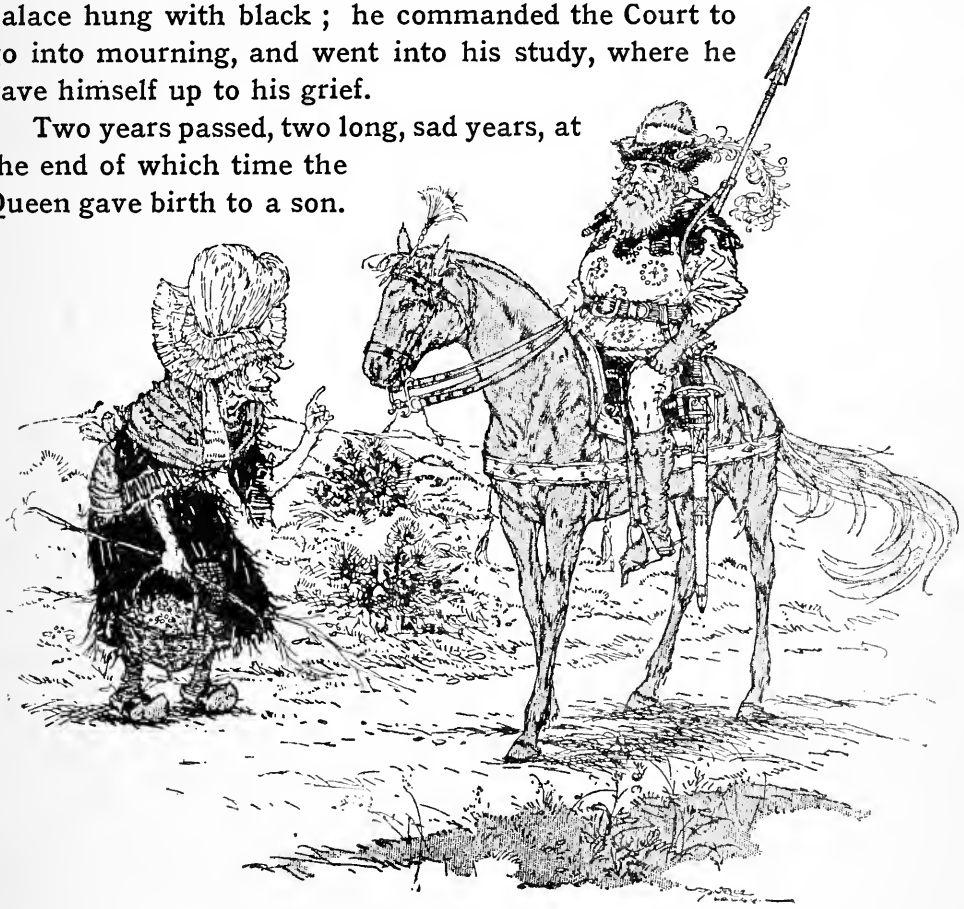
The country was filled with people coming and going and calling, with torches in their hands: thousands of flickering lights moved through the darkness like mysterious will-o'-the-wisps.

At daybreak the officers, soldiers, great lords and peasants went back in great distress to the castle. On the balcony of the turret the Queen was awaiting their arrival, hoping to see her dear Lilyrose. But when she saw her husband come in last, with bent head and shoulders bowed under his purple cloak, riding slowly and looking neither to the right nor the left, she realized that her beloved daughter was lost to

them ; and she was in such despair that she wanted to throw herself down from the tower.

Her women held her back and carried her to her room, where she went to bed in delirium. The King had the whole of the front of his palace hung with black ; he commanded the Court to go into mourning, and went into his study, where he gave himself up to his grief.

Two years passed, two long, sad years, at the end of which time the Queen gave birth to a son.



Heralds announced the happy event to the people, but the King forbade feasts or public rejoicings ; the heir to the throne was baptized in the castle chapel without festivities or merry chimes.

Round his cradle four nobles of the kingdom watched, sword in hand, and from the time when he was old enough to walk by himself

his father selected a guard of twenty officers for him, who were to answer for his safety with their lives.

Now one day when the King had wandered far, while hunting in a forest near his palace, he met a little old woman who was picking strawberries among the bushes by the path.

"Sire," she said as he passed by her, "do not ever tell your son about his sister's misfortune. He has a generous heart, and nothing in the world could prevent him from setting out to look for your unfortunate Lilyrose."

Having said these words, she went off, shaking her head, with her basket of strawberries on her arm.

The King was so surprised that he did not answer; he fell into a deep reverie, and when he raised his head to question the strange woman he saw she had gone.

"Good woman! good woman!" he cried.

No human voice replied. Only the echo of the forest called back to him, and then the birds' songs once more were heard in the branches.

When he got back to the castle he published an order forbidding anyone who could speak or write to remember Princess Lilyrose; no one might mention or trace her name, on pain of imprisonment for life, and death would be the penalty for the reckless man who should dare to recall her existence or misfortunes in the presence of the young prince.

Fifteen years passed.

The King's son, who was called Sapphire, because of the colour of his eyes, which was as clear and deep a blue as a cloudless summer sky, grew up and became strong. He was a fine horseman, slender as an ivy stem and as sturdy as an oak-tree. He excelled in all physical exercises, wielded the sword and the lance better than his most skilled masters, and he had not his equal in hunting.

He was as wise as he was valiant, and had read the best profane authors, studied philosophy, science and the history of all the peoples of the world, not omitting that of his noble ancestors, which was very long, for they had been reigning in the country for centuries and centuries.

One day when he was hunting in the same forest where his father

had met the old strawberry woman, he said to his first equerry, who was riding by his side :

" They say, sir, that you are the best horseman in the kingdom.

Would you care to try your luck against me ? Here is an alley so long that I cannot see the end. We will race our horses. I am curious to see which of us will out-distance the other."

" Let it be as you desire, my lord," said the equerry, who was already trembling with joy at the idea of the ride.

At a given signal they started off.

Bending low on their horses, they urged them on with spur and voice ; behind them rose a cloud of dust, in which dead leaves, moss and twigs were whirled round and round, blown up by their swift race.

Prince Sapphire managed to get in front of his rival, and, carried away by excitement, he soon disappeared round a bend in the alley, without giving another thought to his men. He went on as far as his horses' hoofs would carry him ; at last it stopped in exhaustion, with a wet coat and trembling legs.

" Good day, fair knight," said a little cracked voice, suddenly.

Sapphire looked round and saw an old woman carrying a load of dry wood on her back.

" Good morning, my good woman."

" Would you help me to carry this faggot to my hut ? You are young and strong, and I am old and feeble. It is fitting that at your age you should help the needy."

" Willingly. Wait a moment, good woman, while I tie my horse to this tree, and I am at your service."

Sapphire sprang to the ground, tied his horse's bridle round a young elm-tree, and then hoisting the faggot on his shoulders, paying no attention to the thorns which tore the silk of his doublet, he said :

" You go in front, old woman, and show me the way."

" Thank you kindly, my child. I will not keep you a moment."

She went ahead. Sapphire followed. They soon arrived in front of a poor hut.

" It is here," said the old woman. " Put down your burden, young King's son, and, since you've been so kind to an ugly little old woman like me, I will reward you. Sit down on that log by the door and listen. I'm going to tell you a secret."

" A secret ? What secret ? " asked Sapphire.

" It is this : you are not, as you suppose, the only child of your father and mother. They had a daughter eight years older than you, and she disappeared one fine day while she was walking in the fields. Since then no one knows what became of her. She was called Lilyrose,

and she was worthy to be your sister, my child, for she was as accomplished a maiden as you are a lad."

When he heard these words, Sapphire could not repress an incredulous smile.

"That's all invention, my good woman. For why should my parents have concealed this so-called sister's existence from me?"

"Because, fearing your heart's noble impulse, they thought that you would go off to seek your unfortunate sister. . . . But as you seem to doubt the truth of my story, go back to the palace, young king's son, and ask your father. You will see by his distress that I have been telling you the truth."

"That's what I will do, good woman, at once, without delay. And if I really have a sister imprisoned somewhere on the earth, I shall go and find her, through thick and thin, even if it should cost me my life."

With these words he was going away, but the old woman stopped him.

"Ah, impetuous youth!" she said. "Wait; I've something else to tell you."

"Tell me quickly."

"Well, if you decide to go and find Lilyrose, come back and visit me before venturing across the world, and I'll give you something that may help you in your undertaking. Farewell."

"Say rather, au revoir, for you will see me again this very evening, if you haven't deceived me."

He took his leave of the strange woman and went back to where he had tied up his horse. He undid it, jumped into the saddle, joined his men and hastened back to the palace. He sent them to ask the King to receive him.

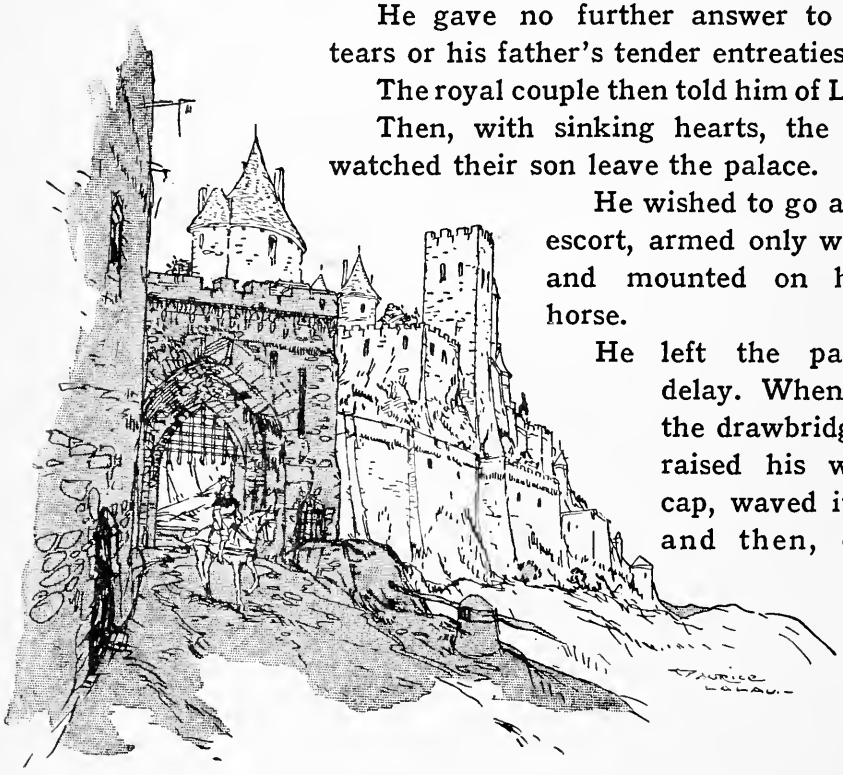
"Good day, Sire," he said. "Is it true that I have a sister called Lilyrose, who has not been heard of for fifteen years?"

At this most unexpected question the King was much distressed. He stammered, grew pale and then suddenly, crimson with anger, he cried:

"Who told you? . . . What creature was rash enough to venture . . ."

"Be calm, Father. Your anger and distress betray you. The person who told me this secret has nothing to fear from Your Majesty. Speak, for I tell you that nothing can keep me at your Court from henceforth. I shall go and deliver my sister and restore her to your love. I have vowed it on my mother's and your head; and if you keep me prisoner, I shall let myself die of hunger."

The King begged his son to give up this plan, in vain; he could not move him. In vain did the Queen, who had been told of this new adventure, come and join her prayers to those of her husband; nothing availed. Sapphire was immovable. "I must go, or I shall die."



He gave no further answer to his mother's tears or his father's tender entreaties.

The royal couple then told him of Lilyrose's fate.

Then, with sinking hearts, the poor parents watched their son leave the palace.

He wished to go alone, with no escort, armed only with his sword and mounted on his favourite horse.

He left the palace without delay. When he reached the drawbridge he turned, raised his white plumed cap, waved it in farewell, and then, digging his spurs into his horse's sides, he disappeared in the direction of the forest.

"Take this cross-bow, King's son"

III

HE galloped along the road leading to the old woman's hut. Night was falling as he knocked at the shutter :

" Hey, good woman, open ! "

" Here you are, my son," said the poor old thing, opening her door wide. " Well, had I deceived you ? "

" No, indeed. And I have not delayed to start. Now I want you to give me the present you spoke of."

The old woman opened an old bread-pan. She took out a crossbow whose well-polished steel shone in the poor gleam of the candle which lighted her hovel.

She handed it to Sapphire, saying :

" Take this crossbow, King's son, and keep it carefully, for it is a fairy one. It has the marvellous power of hitting everything it aims at, man, beast or inanimate thing. I hope it may be of use to you some time. Now lie down and rest till dawn. I will wake you up with the first rays of the sun."

Sapphire thanked the old woman very much. He wanted to leave her without delay and start on his journey in spite of the shades of night ; but she insisted so kindly that he let himself be convinced.

He shared her modest meal and slept in a corner on a bed of leaves.

The next day she woke him at dawn. He went to fetch his horse, embraced the old woman, got into the saddle, and before leaving asked :

" What road should I take ? "

" Go straight before you, King's son ; I can say no more. Any road will do for a brave man."

" Farewell, dear hostess. May you be blessed for your kindness."

" Farewell, my child. Heaven keep you ! "

Sapphire travelled for a whole long week without adventure.

As he did not know which way to go, he always urged his steed straight before him, sometimes asking the passers-by if they had not heard about an imprisoned princess.

But none could give him any news of her.

Now one day, when he was going through a thick wood, he suddenly saw above him, on a high branch of a yew-tree, a bird with such brilliant plumage that he stopped to look at it. It was as big as a pigeon, with bright sky-blue feathers and a glistening plume on its head which seemed to be made of gold and diamonds.

The young prince seized his crossbow, and aimed at this strange bird. But, just as he was going to shoot, the creature turned his sapphire eye towards him and a human voice issued from his beak :

" Stop, King's son ! " it cried. " Stop ! Do not kill me, I beg of you. I am the King of Birds ; have pity on me ! My life is in your hands, as you have got the fairy crossbow, but if you spare me I will reward you."

Touched by these words and astounded at hearing an animal speak in the language of men, Sapphire did not shoot.

" Swear that you will not try and catch me, and I will come nearer."

" I swear it on the heads of my noble parents."

The bird then came down from branch to branch, and perched familiarly on Sapphire's shoulder.

" King's son," he said, " since you granted me my life, I will give you the one gift which it is in my power to give a mortal. From this moment you will know the language of my subjects the birds ; you will understand them and you will be able to speak to them. May this faculty be of use to you in your undertaking. Farewell."

And with a swift movement of the wings he was gone.

" Thank you, kind King," cried Sapphire.

He went slowly on his way, letting the reins lie loosely on the horse's neck, for he could not tire of listening to the wonderful birds' songs which rang through the wood. These sounds which to us are just melodious music were to him coherent hymns, love-songs, canticles praising God, the sun and Nature. He was so astonished at the beautiful things he learnt thus that he stopped at the edge of the wood to rest awhile, for his head was heavy.

A clear spring bubbled up from a cleft in the rock in the shade of

a plane-tree. He got off his horse, hobbled it and sat down by the water's edge, where he soon fell asleep.

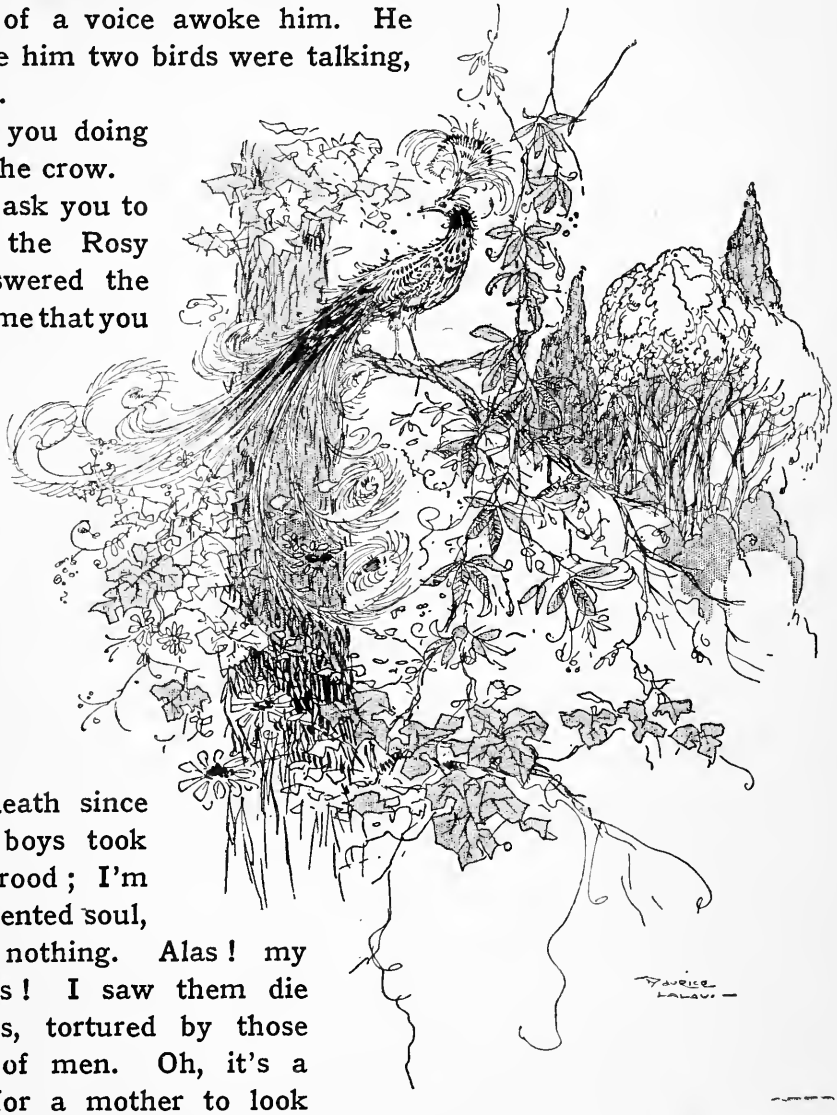
The sound of a voice awoke him. He listened. Above him two birds were talking, a crow and a tit.

"What are you doing here?" asked the crow.

"I want to ask you to take me to the Rosy Fountain," answered the tit. "They told me that you alone know the way there."

"That is quite true. But why do you want to go to the Rosy Fountain?"

"Alas! my lord crow, to get back my happiness, for I am sad to death since those naughty boys took away my last brood; I'm like a poor tormented soul, and I care for nothing. Alas! my dear little ones! I saw them die before my eyes, tortured by those accursed sons of men. Oh, it's a terrible thing for a mother to look helplessly on at her own children's martyrdom. Alas! alas! have pity on me, my lord crow. They say the water of the Rosy Fountain cures the pains of sorrow. . . . Take me there."



" And what will you give me if I take you there ? "

The tit had no time to answer, for Sapphire, seizing his crossbow, aimed at the crow and cried out in bird language :

" Here, Master Crow, show this tit and me the way to the Rosy Fountain. If not I will kill you, for I have the fairy crossbow, and nothing resists its aim."

" I will obey, I will obey," croaked the crow.

" Thank you, Sir Knight," piped the tit.

Sapphire got into the saddle.

" Let us start," he commanded.

And he galloped after the birds in their swift flight.

After crossing mountains and plains, they at last arrived at a cavern standing alone in a deserted heath.

" It is here, lord," croaked the crow, flying into the rocky vault.

" Good," answered Sapphire.

He got off his horse and followed into the cave.

There a stream of water as rosy as the sky at sunrise sprang from the dark sides of a rock.

The crow flapped his wing, and then began in a nasal voice :

" Know, Sir Knight, that this water has the marvellous property of restoring his happiness to anyone who is sad or weeping. One drop is enough to make anyone smile and regain the honest cheerfulness which all creatures enjoy. Two drops make one laugh night and day ; three drops, and one goes into fits of laughter ; one cannot stop laughing, laughing more and more, laughing eternally till one is ill with it, until one finally dies of laughter. Moreover, you now can see with your own eyes the marvellous action of this water."

With these words he took a drop of water on his beak and threw it at the tit, who suddenly began smiling and archly preening her feathers ; she puffed out her breast and made the cave echo with happy trills in which she expressed her joy and contentment.

" Excellent, friend crow, thank you," cried Sapphire.

He bent down to the spring, and taking great care not to wet his fingers he filled with the water a little phial with a crystal stopper, which he had taken from one of his holsters. He placed

it carefully in his bosom, and then took leave of the two birds most civilly.

But the tit accompanied him, perched on the pommel of the saddle, and said :

" Sir Knight, go to the next town, the capital of this kingdom, and ask to see the princess, the daughter of the reigning king. She is a cousin of the one who is keeping your sister Lilyrose imprisoned, and perhaps she could tell you the way to reach her."

Then, rising with a quick flap of the wings, the tit soon disappeared in the blue sky.

IV

THE next day the young prince arrived at the capital, and asked to see the King's daughter.

She received him, seated on an ivory throne, on a terrace paved with gold. Sapphire bowed very low and knelt before her. She was a very beautiful maiden, but her pale lips, her grave face and her anxious brow betrayed the sadness of her heart.

" What are you doing here, young stranger ? Who are you, and what do you want of me ? " she said.

" Madam," answered Sapphire, " I am a king's son, and I offer you my humble homage. They told me in the town that you would be grateful to anyone lucky enough to restore you your happiness.

No one has ever seen you merry, and that is indeed a pity, for nothing is wanting in your perfect features but the charm of a smile."

"Oh," sighed the princess, "if you could force my lips to smile, I would willingly share my kingdom with you, for my father has con-

sented to give me for a husband the man who brings me happiness. Are you he?"

"I believe so, madam. But, though I think you the most charming princess in the world, I do not come as a suitor; I have a sacred duty to perform before considering my own happiness. My sister Lilyrose is kept prisoner by one of your cousins, they say. If you could help me to save her, I would willingly dispel your sadness, I would teach your lips to smile, and—" he hesitated, then finished suddenly, not without blushing to the eyes, "if I succeed, I should consider myself the luckiest of mortals if you did not think me unworthy of becoming your husband when I return."

The princess rose, deeply moved.

" Indeed, my lord, is it true you could restore my happiness ? Well, in exchange, I declare myself your ally, and I will help you by all the means in my power. You will succeed ; my heart desires it eagerly, and I will await your return with great impatience."

Most delighted, Sapphire bowed.

He drew from his bosom the crystal phial, uncorked it, took one drop of the Water of Happiness by means of a feather drawn from his cap, and threw it on the princess.

She instantly smiled.

She was so beautiful thus transfigured and animated by the joy which shone in her face that Sapphire fell on his knees. She held out her little hand to him, which he kissed respectfully.

" Rise, Prince," she said, smiling with her white teeth and bright eyes, " and listen to what I am going to tell you. My cruel cousin, the King of the Hay, has kept your sister Lilyrose a prisoner for nearly seventeen years. He intends her for a wife for his son, and it is high time that you came, for the wedding will soon be performed. I have been asked myself. This King of the Hay is a very ugly dwarf, but one of the most powerful magicians in the world. I will help you to get the better of him, for "—as she said these words, she gave him such tender looks that he thought he would die of joy—" I want nothing better now than the happiness of seeing you again. Know, then, that the tower where your sister languishes stands in the middle of a huge plain where no one can venture without the enchanter being informed at once. For it is covered with marvellous grass which speaks when it is touched. So if you try and step on it, each blade begins calling out, and as the grass grows very thickly, one repeats what the other cries, so that in less than a second the whole plain echoes with a terrible clamour. So the dwarf is informed, and comes to meet the rash visitor, whom he kills pitilessly. As for your possessing the fairy crossbow, let me tell you that it is no good against him, for that weapon is powerless against fairies, enchanters, and magicians."

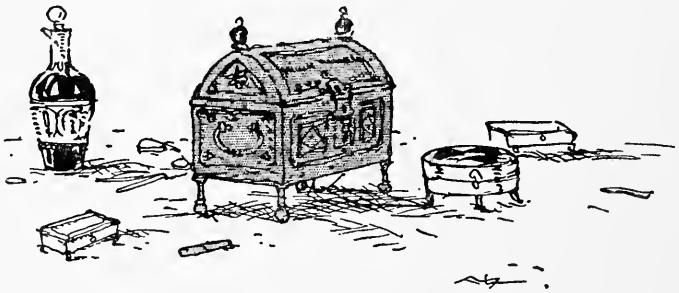
" Alas ! madam," answered Sapphire in a sad voice, " in that case I fear indeed you will never see me again, for, as I cannot fly, I must

perforce walk on that accursed grass and fight the magician, who using one of his accustomed sorceries against me, will kill me like a sheep."

"No, indeed, dear lord. Here, take this box. It contains an ointment. When you come to the magic field, you must take off your shoes and stockings and rub your bare feet with this miraculous ointment. Thanks to the drug, you can walk through the babbling grasses without their denouncing you by their cries, for the ointment has the power of making them dumb. Farewell, dear lord. Be valiant, and come back to us soon. May Heaven guide you."

"Farewell, madam. If I die, my last thought will be for you," answered Sapphire.

He went off after the princess had told him the way which led to the King of the Hay's dwelling.



V

AFTER travelling for a week, Sapphire came to the babbling grasses.

They stretched out before him as far as he could see, waving gently on their short stalks. A few leagues off, in the middle of this treacherous lawn, stood a high tower. Sapphire recognized it from the princess's description. The sight of it increased his courage.

"That is where that wretched dwarf keeps my beloved sister shut up," he thought. "With God's help I will set her free."

He tied his horse to a post, took off his shoes and stockings and rubbed his feet right up above his ankles with the magic ointment. Then he

bravely set foot on the babbling grass. It remained silent, as the princess had foretold.

After an hour, Sapphire reached a sort of hut surrounded by a little garden in which stood a single tree, bearing a magnificent fruit on its topmost branch. It was a perfectly enormous quince; it had so smooth and shining a rind that it seemed to be covered with gold.

When he saw it, Sapphire, who was hungry, felt his mouth beginning to water. He tried to pick it, but it was too high for him to reach with his hand, so he took his fairy crossbow and aimed. He aimed at the stalk so as to knock it down without bruising the luscious flesh. The arrow sped; but hardly had it touched the stalk of the quince than the latter began yelling out in an angry voice:

"Hi! hi! Help! Murder! Some one is shooting me! They are trying to kill me! Murder! Murder!"

A horrible dwarf, doubtless suddenly awakened by this uproar, darted out of the hut with a hatchet in his hand. He rushed at the young man.

"What are you doing here, you dog? And what are you doing to that fruit?"

But the latter aimed at him.

"Stop!" he cried. "Move one step more, only one, and I'll kill you like a mad dog, you ugly monster!"

At this threat the other stopped, and recognizing the fairy crossbow in Sapphire's hands, he bowed to the ground.

"Hail to the possessor of the miraculous weapon," he said. "I am in your power . . . have pity on me!"

"Can you help me to set Lilyrose free?"

"Yes, I can."

"Well, tell me what I ought to do, and I will deign to spare your life."

"You must bring me the Singing Apple which is kept by Giant Steelheart near here. But know, my lord, that your crossbow is useless against him, for he is invulnerable. In exchange for the apple, I'll give you the Golden Quince, without which you could not set Lilyrose free, for only the possessor of its pips can enter the doorless and windowless tower where your sister is shut up."

"But can't you give me the Golden Quince at once?"

"Impossible, my lord; it is stuck up there so firmly that you could spend your life shooting at it without knocking it down. You would only summon my master, the King of the Hay, who would be roused by its clamour. Only the Singing Apple knows the song which will induce it to leave its branch. Hurry up and go and pluck it."

Then the dwarf showed him the road which led to Steelheart's dwelling.

Sapphire started off, and soon he found the giant keeping watch at the foot of his apple-tree. When he caught sight of the young prince, he grinned, showing his terrible teeth. He got up, and Sapphire could

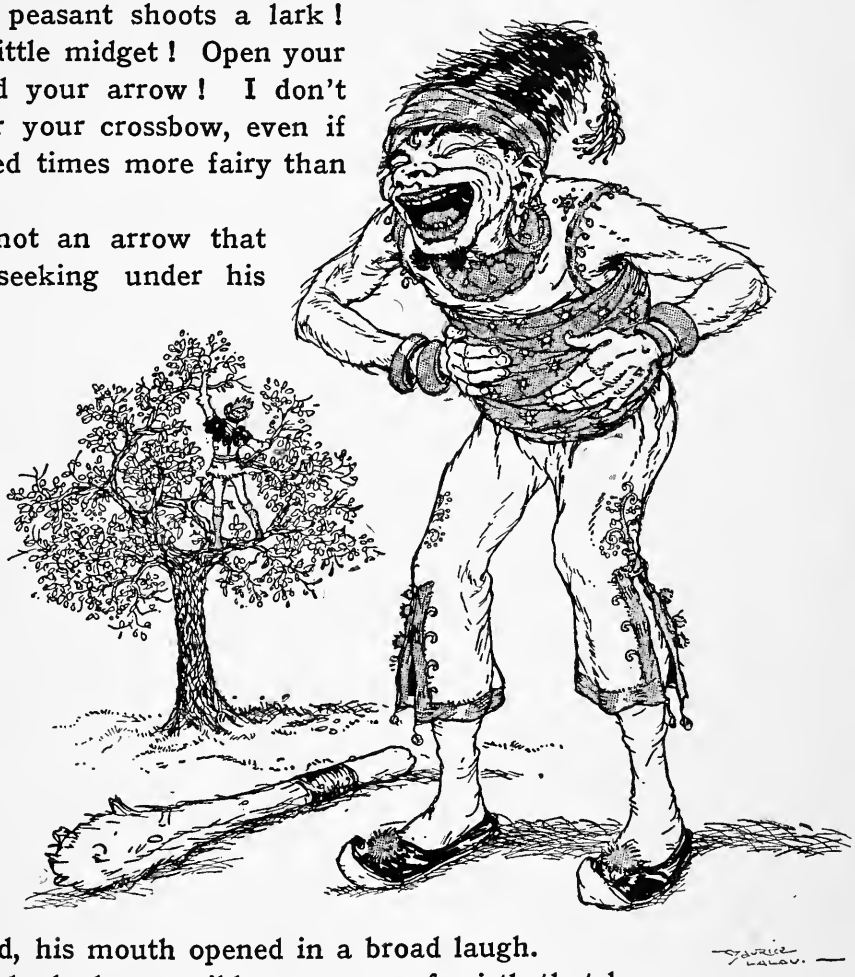
not help trembling when he saw his huge size. His head seemed to reach to the clouds, and he cried from that height, raising his club :

"Ha ! ha ! Look at the cheeky little mortal coming to shoot Steelheart as a peasant shoots a lark ! Oh ! yes, you little midget ! Open your doublet and find your arrow ! I don't care a hang for your crossbow, even if it were a hundred times more fairy than it is."

But it was not an arrow that Sapphire was seeking under his doublet.

He drew out the precious phial with the Water of Happiness, lifted the cork a-little, and fearlessly threw three drops, drip ! drip ! drip ! against the giant's body.

At the first, Steelheart began to smile.



At the second, his mouth opened in a broad laugh.

At the third, he had so terrible an access of mirth that he writhed and struggled like a whale on a gigantic harpoon. His hand relaxed and dropped his club : first he held his sides with both hands, then he rolled and writhed on the ground, chuckling horribly, weeping and making grimaces which contorted his whole face with laughter.

Sapphire, paying no more attention to his enemy lying thus helplessly at his mercy, climbed up the apple-tree and plucked the Singing Apple. Hardly had his fingers closed on it than it began a melodious song. The dwarf heard the young prince returning from afar.

"Ha! ha! you have beaten Steelheart!" he said. "You have got the Singing Apple! Glory to you, valiant lord! Give me the wonderful fruit—give it here quickly."

The little man seized the apple and put it under the quince-tree. No sooner was it there than it began so touching an air that Sapphire and the dwarf could not restrain their tears. Suddenly the Golden Quince trembled on its stalk and after a few moments it fell down on the moss near the Singing Apple. Sapphire took it, cut it open and collected the pips.

"When you reach the foot of the doorless and windowless tower, my lord," said the dwarf, "throw these pips one after the other against the wall wherever you like: after throwing the last, it will open of itself at once. Then call your sister; she will come to the threshold. Farewell. Thank you very much for sparing my life."

And he knelt down, beating the ground with his forehead, while the young prince walked quickly away.

VI

SAPPHIRE did as the dwarf had told him.

When he came to the foot of the doorless and windowless tower, he flung the pips against the wall, and when he had thrown the last, it trembled, cracked, and then opened noiselessly.

Then the prince called out three times :

" Lilyrose ! Lilyrose ! Lilyrose ! I am your dear brother come to set you free."

A beautiful maiden appeared in the breach which the pips had made so marvellously. She was so exactly like Sapphire that you would certainly have taken her for him if she had worn men's clothes.

As soon as he saw her, he said to her loudly :

" Take care ! Do not come out, my beloved sister ; do not venture your foot on this treacherous field. Do not come out, whatever you do. For the babbling grass which surrounds us would waken your tormentor. What shall we do ? If you touch the ground, we are lost."

He thought a few moments, and then added suddenly :

" Wait. I know a trick. I will put you on my back and carry you until we are out of this accursed region. So your pretty feet will not touch this wicked grass."

He went up to her : Lilyrose flung her white arms round his neck and let herself be placed on his shoulders.

They started.

As he was walking she covered the back of his neck with kisses, murmuring the tenderest things in her sweet voice. This gave him fresh courage ; the happy Sapphire felt strong enough to carry his beloved sister to the ends of the world.

They were about to leave the magic field when the young prince's ankle knocked against a stone which was treacherously hidden under the grass. It cut his flesh, and his blood flowed. At the touch of the blood, which was protected by no marvellous ointment, first one grass, then ten, then a hundred, then thousands and millions, and finally every blade in the field, began howling terribly.

This clamour seemed to rise from the ground itself. Sapphire and Lilyrose seemed to be going through the horrible din of a storm.

Suddenly the princess cried out :

" Quick, Sapphire ! Here's that dreadful King of the Hay ! He

is running at us with his scimitar ! Quick ! dearest brother, or we are lost ! "

The prince started off at a furious gallop, but the dear burden which he bore kept him back.

The King of the Hay was gaining on them ; soon he was only a few yards off.

" Quick ! quick, Sapphire ! In heaven's name ! He is upon us ! We are lost ! "

Sapphire hastily drew from his doublet the phial with the Water of Happiness.

He uncorked it and gave it to his sister.

The brother entered proudly on his courser

"Throw the contents of this phial behind you on the ground," he ordered her. "Quick! quick! But take great care, whatever you do, not to let any drop touch you, my beloved Lilyrose."

The King of the Hay was stretching out his arm to seize the flying couple when Lilyrose's white hand upset the phial all at once.

And then the ground, yes, the very earth itself began laughing; laughing so terribly that hills and vales were disturbed.

It opened wide as a man's mouth when he is roaring with laughter! Behind the brother and sister a ghastly chasm was opened which swallowed up the King of the Hay.

They heard a last curse flung at them by the dwarf. . . . Then nothing but the monotonous sound of the wind whistling through the now silent grass, and the happy neighing of Sapphire's horse, who, recognizing his master, was stretching out his noble head towards him.

The two young people fell on their knees to thank Heaven for their deliverance.

Then, after many embraces, they continued their journey gaily.

They soon came to the capital, where Sapphire had left his fair princess.

The brother entered proudly on his courser, his hand on his hip, carrying his sister behind.

And all who met them, having heard of their adventures, greeted them with prolonged cheers and bowed their heads in the dust.

At the sound of the cheers, the fair princess went to her palace window, and recognized her glorious suitor, and ran down smiling to meet him.

"Oh! dear lord," she said, "how happy I am to see you again! Since you left, I have wept so much for you that my father said you were an impostor, and would not believe the miracle of the Water of Happiness."

That night the whole city was illuminated. And in the grand hall of the castle the marriage of Sapphire and his dear princess was made.

Less than a week afterwards, Lilyrose and her brother started for their parents' kingdom. The new bride went with them.

They had a triumphal entry into the city of their ancestors. And

when the King and Queen saw their beloved children once more, they nearly died of joy.

Sapphire presented his young bride to them, and they received her with a thousand kind words.

"I set out to bring you one daughter," he said to them, "and now I have brought you two."

For a whole month there were rejoicings throughout the kingdom. They drank, they danced, and they feasted the whole day, and began again the next. They had fireworks and public games, and gold was distributed to whoever held out his hand.

But as I was not there, I cannot tell you if all this is true.

THE STORY OF THE THREE KING'S SONS AND OF A MAN WHO THOUGHT HE COULD TELL LIES

THE STORY OF THE THREE KING'S SONS AND OF A MAN WHO THOUGHT HE COULD TELL LIES

ONCE there was a poor little Kinglet who, in consequence of being charitable, good and just, had not even a roof left to shelter him.

He had frittered away his dominions in almsgiving, sold his jewels and furniture to spare his subjects the trouble of paying taxes, and finally distributed his treasure among those who, being poorer than their neighbours, accused Fate of injustice.

He had nothing left but a horse and its harness. He slept with his three sons in a canvas tent which he pitched now here, now there, in the streets or public squares, so as to be a burden on no one.

Now it happened one winter evening that the King took cold and died.

He was buried with great pomp, and then, after the ceremony, the three sons went back to their tent. They did not quarrel about dividing their inheritance, but decided to draw lots for the charger and his harness.

The eldest had the bridle, the second the saddle, and the youngest the horse.

Thereupon they set out into the world, for their title of king's sons was not enough to keep them, and they had to earn their living.

They left altogether, and all took service with a farmer who made them work very hard and paid them very little. Weary of this miserable and dreary existence, the eldest, who was called Constantine, said to his brothers one fine day :

"I am going into the neighbouring town to try and sell my bridle."

When he reached the market-place, he walked around among the purchasers, with his bridle round his neck, crying :

"Who'll buy a bridle, a good bridle ? Who wants a bridle ? "

But in vain he wore out his lungs : no one paid any attention to him.

However, towards midday, when the market was nearly over, a very well-dressed citizen came up to the prince and said :

"Come to my house. Perhaps we can do business together."

"Willingly," answered the prince.

They started off, and soon arrived at the stranger's dwelling, which was big, well situated and noble-looking. They went in.

"You see this house," the man said to Constantine, after he had begged him to be seated at a table loaded with food. "Well, it is yours in exchange for your bridle, if you are a better liar than I. Each of us shall tell a lie : if yours is the bigger, you shall have my house, and you shall let me have your bridle ; if mine is worse, you will give

me your bridle and go your way with no further profit than the dinner we will take while we talk. Is that a bargain ? ''

'' I accept.''

'' Well, you begin.''

Constantine began spinning a thousand mad yarns, winding on all the nonsensical notions which came into his head. When he came to the end of the reel :

'' Well, have you done ? '' asked the other.

'' Yes,'' answered the prince ; '' that's all I know.''

'' Well, it's my turn now. I'll begin. Listen.

'' Once I had a donkey which ate so many pumpkins that it died. No sooner was it dead than a pumpkin plant came out of its stomach and began growing and growing so tall and straight that it reached the clouds, where I lost sight of it. At that moment the stalk became covered with so many knots that they served as rungs on which one could climb up to Heaven and come down again quite easily.

'' There. What do you say to that ? Frankly, which do you think is the greater liar ? ''

'' You, master ; you have won the bet. Here is the bridle.''

And after the meal Constantine returned to the farm poorer than he had left it, with neither bridle nor crowns.

After some time, the second king's son, who was called George, said to his brothers :

'' I am going to try and sell my saddle in the town.''

He reached the market, carrying his saddle on his head, and walked up and down, crying :

'' Who'll buy a saddle ? Who wants a saddle ? I've a fine saddle to sell.''

But he offered his goods in vain : no one wanted it.

Towards twelve o'clock, as he was going away in great depression, he saw a man coming towards him. Now, it was the same citizen who had made the honest bet with his brother.

'' Will you come to my house ? '' he said. '' Perhaps we can do business together.''

George went with him to his house, sat down at the table, ate,

accepted the strange bargain, told his lies, listened to his host's, and lost his saddle as Constantine had lost his bridle. In the evening he returned to the farm much depressed, and told his two brothers of his misfortune.

"To-morrow I shall go and try and get something for my horse," said the youngest, who was called John.

The next day the young man went to the market, leading his horse by the halter.

"Who wants a horse, a fine horse? . . . A horse to sell! . . ." he cried.

A few purchasers came up, among whom John recognized the lucky better, for his brothers had described his features and his dress. He addressed him at once.

"Since you have got a saddle and a bridle already," he said, "all you want is the horse. Let us go to your house, and we will arrange it there."

They reached the man's house, sat down and ate; then the citizen made Jack the same proposal as he had done to his brothers.

"I accept with pleasure," said the youngest.

"Well, you begin."

"No, by all the Saints in Paradise! That is too kind! I am your guest; here I am at your table, eating your bread and drinking your wine, and it is only fair that I leave you the honour of beginning. Besides, are not you the elder? You might be my father. Speak first, as it is fitting."

"No, indeed my son."

"Very well, then, the bargain is off. For I would not be lacking in respect for old age for a kingdom. Begin, father, begin."

After being pressed again and again, the man started and told his lie.

"It's your turn now, my son," he said when he had finished.

"Is that all you know, father?" asked John.

"Yes, that's all."

"Very well; I'll begin. Listen.

"I was a hundred and ten when I was born, and my mother was only a hundred. I took leave of her directly after my birth and grasping my staff to support my old age, I set off by the first road I came across. After walking two centuries in a minute, I came to a spring where I bent down to drink. As I stretched out my neck, without noticing it, I dropped my head into the water. I went gaily on my way; and as I passed through a field I saw two pilgrims standing on a mushroom, discussing the eternal laws. They turned round when they saw me: 'Hullo!' said one, nudging his companion, 'look, there's a man walking without a head!' Then in great surprise I put up my hands to my face and found that the pilgrim had indeed told the truth.

"I thought at once, 'You must have let it drop in that spring when you bent down,' so I retraced my steps. When I got to the spring, I saw a fox, who had dragged up my head and pulled it out of the water, and was just eating my brains; so. . . ."

"Stop, my son, that's enough! I confess I am beaten: my house is yours!" cried the man.

He got up, took John's horse by the halter, and went away without another word.

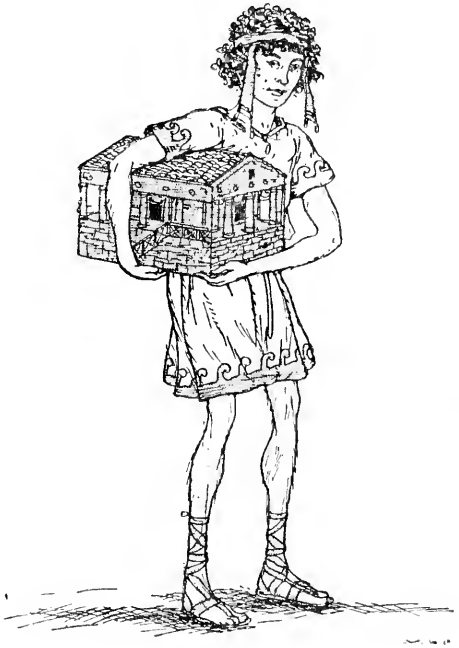
The youngest son, delighted with the adventure, went over his new property from attic to cellar and found it richer than he had hoped.

He sent a messenger to his brothers at once, telling them to come to him and share his good fortune.

They did not wait to be pressed, and soon arrived, as you can imagine.

Since then, Constantine, George and John lived more happily in their house than they ever had before, even while their father was reigning.

(From a Eubœan tale.)



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