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The Silver bells

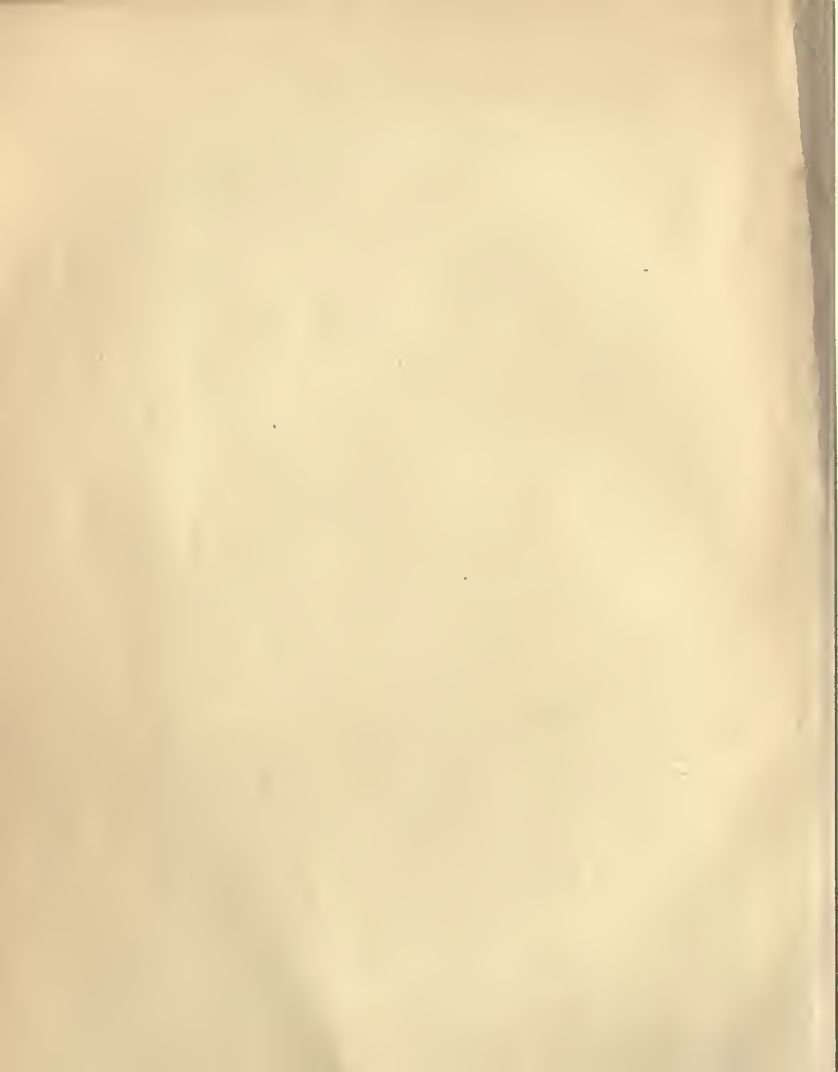
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THE  
SILVER BELLS.

In Allegory.

BY

THE REV. I. GREGORY SMITH, M.A.

RECTOR OF TEDSTONE DELAMERE,  
AND PREBENDARY OF HEREFORD CATHEDRAL.

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TO  
MY LITTLE DAUGHTER,  
IN MEMORY OF HER BROTHER,  
FOR WHOM, WITH HER, IT WAS WRITTEN,  
THIS TALE  
OF A BROTHER AND SISTER  
IS LOVINGLY INSCRIBED.

I. G. S.

*Tedstone Delamere.*



# THE SILVER BELLS.

*In Allegory.*

“I dreamed a dream, and behold——”



**T** was one of those bright mornings in early spring, when all things are quickened by new life. The hills far off stood out darkly blue against the yellow sky, as if the brightness would not last. There were clouds, ominous of storms, in heavy masses on the sky-line. But near at hand there was a flood of sunshine, and a sweet freshness in the air, and that faint twittering of birds which is the prelude to their full burst of song in summer.

Two children were standing on the grass in front of a dwelling-place, a girl and a boy. The fair flowing hair of the elder glittered like gold in the sun, and rippled in tiny waves over her shoulders, as the soft wind lifted it up and let it fall again. Upright and graceful she was, with face as bright as the morning, and which looked as if the storms would not disturb it much, if they should come. Her brother, about a year younger, looked a clever thoughtful boy, with a wistful expression in his blue eyes, and delicately-shaped lips. They were talking and laughing together, as merry as the birds around them.

The door opened, and there appeared in the porch the father and mother of these two. I knew them by their likeness and

by their words. The children hushed their play, and ran back to meet them, as if surprised, for their father seemed very sad, and their mother scarcely refrained from weeping. Very lovingly they looked on their children as he said, "The time is come; and we must bid you both farewell. No, not for ever;" he went on, as the children's countenances became like an April sky when a cloud darkens it and the great drops begin to fall; "but we must send you forth through yonder wicket-gate, trusting that we all may meet again at last, where those blue Hills stand waiting to receive us. That will be the end of your journey, if you give good heed to what I say. It is a long way, and there are many dangers. Up the Hundred Steps hewn in the rock

you must go, and across the Great Plain before you reach the end. Sometimes it will be hard to know which is the way. Often you will be weary, when your tender feet shall be wounded by the flints, and your eyes shall fail, looking for rest in vain. But what we fear most for you is this: lest you should be lured to rest too long in the Bower of Ease, and lest you should perish as you walk through the City of Palaces, which is the City of the Dead. Oh, Arthur, Alice," he went on, as they gazed up in his face very ruefully, "fear not, for this is the way which all must go before reaching yonder hills. Our King Himself went this way and no other ere He went back to His Throne. See, His messengers have brought these gifts for you, to furnish you for the journey."



So he gave to each child a staff, straight and tapering to a spike, saying, "This will steady your footsteps always." And their mother tied a little silver bell, like a locket, round the neck of each child, saying, "In trouble sound this bell, and help will come quickly," and they fastened a small lantern to the belt of each child, saying, "This will be a light to lighten your way. Keep the staff unbroken," he added, "the bell untarnished, the light in the lantern brightly burning; help one another, and all shall be well." Also each child was furnished with a wallet of provisions for the way.

Their father spoke once again: "Beware, O children, dearer to us than our very lives, of the wolves which are pursuing you. We have often warned you, and yourselves have

heard their howling at times far behind on your track. Their long untiring gallop never ceases, never slackens its speed. Sometimes in the twilight, ere the darkness descends, we have seen the leader of the pack, a gaunt old wolf, coming nearer and nearer, with his tongue hanging from his gory jaws, as if he would devour us. Praise to our King, we have as yet escaped him and his horde! But these raveners will never leave pursuing you till your journey is done. You cannot elude them altogether; for they have a keen scent for their prey, and their feet are swift to shed blood; their hunger cannot be sated; their craft and their malice never sleep. But, behold, He Who watches over you never slumbers nor sleeps. Press on boldly, children, to the end, with Him

for your helper ; and leave the wolves to gnash their teeth in despair. Farewell, farewell for a while."

The children clung to their parents, with kisses and tears, as if they could not bear to part. But I heard a sound, as of a great clock in a tower nigh at hand announcing the hour ; and I saw the children go forth, hand in hand, through the wicket gate, on their way.

The sky was so bright overhead, the birds were calling one to another so joyously, and the few flowers, which peeped out here and there from under shelter, smiled so hopefully on the little travellers, that they soon grew cheerful again. At first the way was down a narrow lane, arched over by the branches of stately trees. The

children sauntered slowly a while, hand in hand, with many a look back to the home which they were never to revisit. But as the sun climbed higher, the air began to teem with life. Insects of every hue, on gauzy wings of transparent lustre, flashed to and fro before them. Butterflies, each one gayer in its apparel than another, were flitting hither and thither in search of new sport. Bees, intent on their labours for the common good, were humming busily over whatever they could find fragrant and wholesome. There were glimpses too, ever and anon, of a wide plain afar off. No wonder the children quickened their pace, and their hearts beat faster as they saw how gloriously the plain glowed in the distance under the sun.

The lane ended in a wood; and here Arthur and Alice paused, as if in doubt which way to choose. Three ways were before them: one to the right was level and spacious, and worn with many foot-marks; one to the left was somewhat narrower and seemingly less frequented; but it was soft as velvet to the feet, with its mossy sward, and sloped gently downwards: creeping plants in tangled clusters hung over it with their gaudy petals and heavily-drooping foliage. The other path, right in front, led up an ascent, and was steep and rugged.

The children stood and doubted. I heard a distant howling drawing near, and I longed for them to choose the right way speedily.

At this moment a youth rose from the sward, where he was stretched at length, and beckoned Arthur and Alice to follow him down the path to the left, singing to them—

“Down in the dingle,  
Happen what may,  
Here we go roving,  
Roving away.

“Fame is a daydream,  
Work is for slaves;  
As the wind rocks,  
So the tree waves.”

He was equipped, as they, with wallet, staff, bell, and lantern. But as I looked more closely I saw that his staff was broken, his bell tarnished, the light in his lantern very dim, and his wallet torn and empty. So the three went together, and he led the way.

The path sloped down very gradually, with many a turn and bend, displaying something new every moment. But soon it became oozy under their feet as a morass, so that Arthur and his sister could hardly keep themselves from sinking. They looked reproachfully at each other, and called aloud on their guide. But there was no answer; only a sound of mocking laughter far away. Then all was still. The air was stifling with the languid perfume of the creepers, through which the light of heaven could scarcely force its way. In their distress they thought of their bells, and rang them loudly for assistance. Nor was it in vain. As they were turning their lanterns every way in their perplexity, the rays fell on several

large boulders, which had hitherto escaped their notice, placed at intervals along the path. They began to retrace their steps with fear and trembling, for their lanterns disclosed to them a chasm yawning beside them, precipitous and apparently bottomless. They recoiled in horror; and again the peals of derisive laughter smote their ears. At first every step was pain. For the stones were far apart, and the creepers trailing across the path held the children back as they sprang from one to another. Alice was very weary. Her feet were bleeding from the stones and briars; and once a snake, darting from the bushes, wounded her foot so that she wept with fear and pain. But her brother supported her with his hand. In time the light of the



sun dawned on them again, as they emerged from the pestiferous jungle into the fresh air which they had forsaken so foolishly.

A great multitude, of all ages and of all conditions, were hurrying along the level path to the right. Arthur and Alice, almost without a thought, moved with the crowd, as feathers are swept onward by a stream. There seemed no time for pausing to think, for every one hastened to be first. The way was broad enough, even for so many wayfarers, but it seemed as though none could advance without thrusting his neighbour aside. Some few who chanced to be left in the rear, wore a scowl of envy and discontent on their faces. Those who were stronger and swifter than the rest had the advantage. But they seemed unable to

enjoy it. In their fear of being overtaken, they never rested to admire the flowers which bordered the dusty road. Though spent with running and parched with thirst, they seemed not to hear or not to heed the refreshing murmur of water gushing from a Rock which they passed with knit brows and compressed lips as if they saw it not. Ever and anon one or another fell to the ground, as if pierced through the heart. But none stopped to pity. The rest struggled on, leaving those who were fallen to lie where they fell. The feeble and friendless were trampled underfoot, and none cared. For a moment there was a pause. A voice, borne on the wind, passed over the crowd, crying, "Vanity, vanity, all is vanity." For a moment all bowed their heads and were

still. Arthur and his sister seized the chance of freeing themselves from the confusion. The multitude swept past them, and they, with much thankfulness of heart, returned to the place whence they had started.

An aged man was seated on the bank, under a spreading oak-tree, where the three ways parted. He signed to Arthur and Alice to draw near, and accosted them kindly. His face was grave and marked with many furrows; his long white beard almost touched the ground; and he spoke slowly, as if pondering his words well.

“My name,” he said, “is Experience; and I sit here by the command of the King, day by day, and year by year, and century by century, to tell others the way.

You saw me not, because you looked not for me. Some listen to me; some reject my counsel, and choose to find the way for themselves. Come near, O children, and hearken unto me, and I will show you the way; for I have seen many and strange things, I have tried every way, and I have learned that one alone is right. There," he said, pointing to the left, "lies the path which is called the path of Pleasure, but it is the path of misery. There," he said, pointing to the right, "lies the path of Ambition. You were wise to leave it in time. Here, straight before you, is the path of Duty, which leads to the hills far away. Farewell, and may you reach them!" So speaking, he applied to their wounds cooling leaves. "For," said he, "I know the

leaves which are for the healing of the nations.”

Arthur and Alice set forth again with new cheerfulness. Their lanterns burned brightly, their bells tinkled as they went, and they planted their staves firmly as they began to climb the hill. The cry of the wolves sounded far away. At first the ascent was very difficult. Sometimes they seemed to make no way at all ; sometimes they seemed even to lose ground and to slip backward. Soon they discovered that the way, though toilsome, was not so difficult as they had thought. Steps had been hewn in the rocky path up which they were climbing. So, by taking heed to their way, and making each step sure before they tried to advance, and by holding out a

hand to one another, they gained the summit. They remembered how their father had foretold them of the Hundred Steps, and this, though it brought tears into their eyes, gave them new courage to climb higher and higher. Their voices sounded very pleasantly to me, as they cheered one another along.

I watched them as they journeyed on through the wood. At times their path was hidden by trees and bushes which had overgrown it and their lanterns were useful. Presently they came to an open space, where the sward was smooth as velvet and green as emerald. Here they espied a Bower, overhung with woodbine and clematis—a resting-place provided for travellers by the King. They entered in,

and rested for a while. As they were rising to resume their journey, a woman came near, bearing a basket of luscious fruits on her arm. She was of a fair countenance, and her speech was sweeter than honey. She gave them of the fruits, bidding them to rest longer before going on their way. Then a strange drowsiness crept over them, numbing their limbs with a delicious languor, and they slept in the Bower.

Before very long they were aroused by a noise in the distance, like the music of rebecks and dulcimers. They ran forth to hear and to see. A motley band was issuing from a glade on the left, men and women dancing hand in hand. Their cheeks were flushed, and their eyes glittering; they were clad in wavy robes,

and had garlands on their foreheads. The music at first was low and soothing, and Arthur with his sister stood spellbound by its charm. Soon they found themselves beating time with hand and foot against their will, and accompanying every movement of the dancers with corresponding motions. The music waxed louder, and the dancing wild and furious, and the dancers clashed their cymbals together frantically. Arthur and Alice would have retreated to the Bower, but the revellers closed round them in a circle, and kept them in on every side. More and more tumultuous grew the revel, and the visages of the dancers changed from smiles to a ferocious glare. Tearing their garlands from their brows, they clutched the dag-



gers which they wore at their sides, and brandished them aloft with savage cries and threatening gestures. Arthur and Alice looked round in despair for help. Panic-stricken, they sank to the ground; but as they fell, their bells gave forth a faintly audible sound. Then they remembered the promise, which in their alarm they had forgotten, and sounded their bells loudly for deliverance. At the first sound, the revellers loosed hands, and stood as if rooted to the earth, haggard and voiceless. When they heard the sound again, they turned and fled. Arthur and Alice rose from the ground. They were alone, and all was still.

As they went on their way, they were attracted by the rippling of water. Turning

aside, they soon came upon a little stream, sparkling over sand and pebbles. They followed its course eagerly. I saw with sorrow that they had forgotten the warnings of Experience; and as they loitered along the bank, I heard the howling of the wolves nearer. Alice sought to persuade her brother to return. But something bright drifting on the stream had caught his eye, and he was intent on seizing it. His sister followed sadly, beseeching him in vain to desist. He sprang lightly across the brook, and ran eagerly along the other side, intent on the glittering toy which he was after. On and on it danced before him, now swirling round in the sportive eddies, now close to land and almost within his grasp. But

it mocked his quest, dancing light as foam over the rushing waters. Arthur began to think of returning to his sister, but there were difficulties in the way.

In his eagerness he had followed the stream for some distance, and he saw with dismay that to spring back across the swollen stream, now far wider and deeper than it had been, was out of the question. It was rushing past him like a mountain torrent, and the roar, as it bounded over the rocks, was deafening. He looked upwards. The bank under which he stood was sheer as a wall; but there was no other escape. He now remembered with shame that he had left his staff behind in the Bower of Ease. Again and again he tried in vain; at last, after many efforts,

he had wellnigh scrambled to the top, when the loose earth crumbled under his feet, and he began to descend with fearful velocity. In despair he caught hold of a bush, which projected from the bank, and clung to it convulsively. This checked his fall. He was too giddy with his exertions to look downwards, where the stream was roaring far below his feet through the ravine. He thought of his sister, left to finish her journey alone, and he cried, "Oh, Alice, why did I leave you?" Was it fancy? or did he really catch his sister's voice across the chasm? "The bell, brother, the bell!" was all that he could hear. But it was impossible for him to sound his own bell while he was clinging with all his might to the bush. Ever and anon





he could hear, above the noise of the waterflood, the silvery tones of Alice's little bell calling loudly for help. Nor did she call in vain. He heard a step advancing along the brink of the precipice which beetled over him. He heard a voice, saying, "Be of good cheer; help is nigh!" He felt a hand stretched forth over the edge of the cliff; he grasped it firmly, and was drawn upwards. In another moment the bush to which he had been trusting fell with a crash, but he was safely landed on the cliff, with an aged man kindly but gravely regarding him.

At first Arthur thought that this was he who had been sitting at the entrance of the wood. But this old man's cheek was ruddy and unwrinkled as of a boy; and his step

was elastic and full of vigour as in the prime of youth. "No," he said, as if reading Arthur's thoughts, "I am brother to Experience. He has suffered much, and has passed through many trials. I enjoy perpetual youth. My name is Self-control. I will guide you back safely, for I also serve the King." He raised Arthur from the ground, and led him to a long and narrow bridge which spanned the chasm. It was only a pine-tree cloven in twain, and Arthur drew back in misgiving, for the turbid waters were chafing and foaming below, like a wild beast springing on its prey. "Fear not," the old man said, "take this staff in place of that which you left in the Bower, when Self-deceit, with her false smiles and poisonous fruits, sent you into a dangerous



slumber, and the Passions revelled around you." Arthur saw his sister stretching forth her arms to him from the other side. Remembering her advice, he sounded the bell which had never failed to bring strength in need. Thanking the aged man, and grasping his staff manfully, he crossed the bridge without shrinking. There was great rejoicing, mingled with tears, as he and his sister walked on again hand in hand, giving thanks for his deliverance.

Now this path through the forest came to an end. I hardly knew whether they were glad or sorry to quit the shades of the trees, and to set forward over the apparently boundless Plain which lay before them. One thing seemed very curious. The Hills, which I had seen so clearly at first, now

seemed far away. A mist hung over them. I feared lest Arthur and Alice should lose heart; and I longed for them to be guided safely. The path was not so clearly marked as before. Paths without end led over the plain. Some, indeed many of these, though pointing at first towards the Hills, led back, after many windings, to the place whence they started. A confused hum of many voices rose from the plain. Some travellers were crossing it by twos and threes; some in larger companies; and some, wrapt in their own thoughts, quite alone.

Several groups were standing near the forest, as if about to set off across the Plain. They were disputing noisily together and calling aloud to Arthur and his sister. I marked especially a large company, in gor-

geous costume, with pennons flying, and with fifes and drums. They stood marshalled in long columns at some distance from the others, eyeing them disdainfully. "Come with us," they shouted, "none else know the way. See our banners, how they glisten, and hark to our trumpets, how they peal. We are a great army. With us you shall march safely, and you shall rest at your pleasure under the shade of yonder palm-trees."

"Nay!" interposed another, a sour and gloomy-looking man, who was setting off with a few companions in the opposite direction, "follow not the multitude. We are few, because we are too good to walk with our fellows. We have discovered a new way for ourselves. The Plain is a bar-

ren, dreary wilderness." Let others perish as they deserve. We have a special promise. We shall go safely, do what we will."

As the children doubted, turning in bewilderment from one to another, they heard the strains of a lyre nigh at hand. They saw a group reclining on a grassy mound as if with no thought of making for the Hills. And they heard a voice singing to the lyre sweetly and sadly, thus—

“We see not your mountains,  
We know not your way;  
The darkness steals o'er us  
And quenches the day.  
We lie, and we watch you  
With smiles and a sigh—  
What boots it? Oh! leave us  
To doubt and to die!”

As the children paused, I heard a voice, as of the parents whom they had left long ago,

saying, "This is the way; walk ye in it." And again it came on the wind, "Meddle not with them that are given to change." Then Arthur and Alice joined themselves to a party of travellers, attired as themselves, and equipped as themselves, with bells, staves, lanterns, and wallets, and set off with them along a beaten track which seemed to lead straight across the Plain.

Now I lost sight of Arthur and Alice for a time, as they were in the crowd. I gazed after them anxiously; for though the Plain wore a cheerful aspect, with its ever-shifting multitudes, I saw in many places sights which filled me with dread. Along every track were skeletons of those who had fallen never to rise again. And though many of the travellers, especially the young, looked

full of confidence, not a few dragged themselves along wearily, or lagged far behind the rest, as if forgotten by their friends, or sat down by the way, as if they had no heart for the journey. Many, also, turned back, and forsook their comrades. Straining my eyes, I recognised at last Arthur and Alice ; and I was greatly afraid for them.

Somehow they had been separated from their company, and had been attacked by the robbers who infested the Plain. I heard the clash of swords around them, for the robbers were contending over their booty. Alice and Arthur were on their knees in the midst ; and his arm was round his sister, as though he would defend her. I heard the music of their bells in the air, and I knew that help would come. As I

gazed, two horsemen of princely bearing rode swiftly to the rescue. Brightly flashed the armour which they wore, and the swords which they waved, but brighter far was the flash of their eyes, as they came near without a word. The robbers fled in terror; and Arthur raised his sister to follow their companions. Perhaps they saw not, as I saw, their deliverers; perhaps they feared to ask their names. But I heard them, as they walked on, saying one to another in a low voice, "He shall give His angels charge concerning thee, to keep thee in all thy ways." And I heard them giving thanks to the King, who had sent His warriors to their rescue.

I observed, that while Arthur and Alice were severed from their comrades by this delay, the stealthy tramp of the wolves

seemed nearer. But it died away again at the approach of the warriors.

As I watched the onward journey of the brother and sister, I rejoiced to see that they marched in their places with the rest. And if any one in their company was weak or weary, they put forth a helping hand, and spoke a cheering word, and often bore the burdens of those who seemed overburdened. Alice, thus employed, looked fairer and brighter than ever, and her brother had lost his look of wistfulness.

And now they were all approaching a great City which rose in the midst of the Plain, its towers and domes flushed by the setting sun. The City was glorious, seen from afar, and a noise of music and revelry came floating on the breeze like the



roar of the distant sea. But as we came nearer, the purple glow died away from its towers, and I heard a low moaning sound which never ceased, and swelled at times into a wail of agony. Grimly rose the walls of the City before the travellers, and the massive gates of iron swung slowly back without a sound to let them in. The spacious thoroughfares were thronged with a restless crowd, drifting to and fro, as if without a purpose. The hum of many voices was blended in one sound, the shouts of revellers, and the hoarse cries of strife, and the wail of agony. Every face wore an uneasy and troubled expression, as if all were seeking something which they could not find. Huge and stately palaces blazed with lights in every window ; and, side by

side with these, were wretched hovels wherein all was darkness, or from which a thin streak of light glimmered here and there through some chink in the walls. One large dismal building caught my gaze irresistibly. Every door and window was rigidly closed with bolts and bars, as if to shun all intercourse with those without. Within, all was silence. But ever and anon I heard a creaking sound, as of bolts drawn back, and a casement was flung open, and a face, pale and spectral, peered out into the turmoil; and then all was closed fast again and silent as the grave.

Arthur and Alice, with the rest, were threading their way with difficulty through the crowd, when they were confronted by a weird-looking figure. He was bare-

footed, and his long coarse robe was fastened round his waist by a cord. He tossed his arms madly in the air, as if forbidding the travellers to advance. "Back, back, back!" he cried, "from the accursed place. Back from the City of the Plague!"

As he spoke, I observed that ever and anon dark-looking tumbrils passed noiselessly and swiftly up and down the streets. At their approach, the crowd was still for a moment, and all faces gathered blackness. As they passed, the wail of agony rose louder than before. Again the stranger shrieked his warning, and stood as though to stop the way. But I could hear those who walked in front saying, as they took counsel together, "The King has said that we are to be in the world, though not of

the world," and "we must follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth." So they walked on with steadfast pace, Arthur and his sister following. But the stranger, with one or two more, rushed to that dismal pile, and battered wildly at the door till they were admitted. The door closed heavily upon them, and I saw them no more.

The others came, as they wended their way through the City, to a vast square, girt with magnificent edifices, whose gigantic pillars and porticoes loomed through the lurid light of many torches. A colossal figure of bronze sat in the centre on a throne which towered high above the heads of the people. His face was stern and implacable, with a scornful smile on his lips and the people bowed and worshipped

him. Round the crown which encircled his lowering brow was written in letters of fire, DESTINY. Arthur and Alice, with the rest, forced their way through the crowd, and as they passed, I marked that every bell in that little company raised its gentle voice above the uproar of the surging multitude. At a signal, those who were loudest and wildest in their adoration of the colossal statue rushed forward to arrest the travellers and compel them to worship. But lo! a thick darkness fell upon that vast assemblage. In vain they called aloud one to another, for assistance. The travellers passed unharmed through the midst, their lanterns throwing a ray of light before the feet of each one, while all around was utter darkness.

I saw no more; I only heard sweet music welcoming the travellers as they went through the farther gates of that great City. Methought I heard the voices of those who had parted with Arthur and Alice long ago, greeting them again fondly. Louder and louder the music swelled upon mine ears, as of a great multitude welcoming the new comers. All with one accord were pouring forth heart and voice in one great hymn of praise: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing. Blessing, and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth on the throne, and to the Lamb, for ever and ever. Amen."

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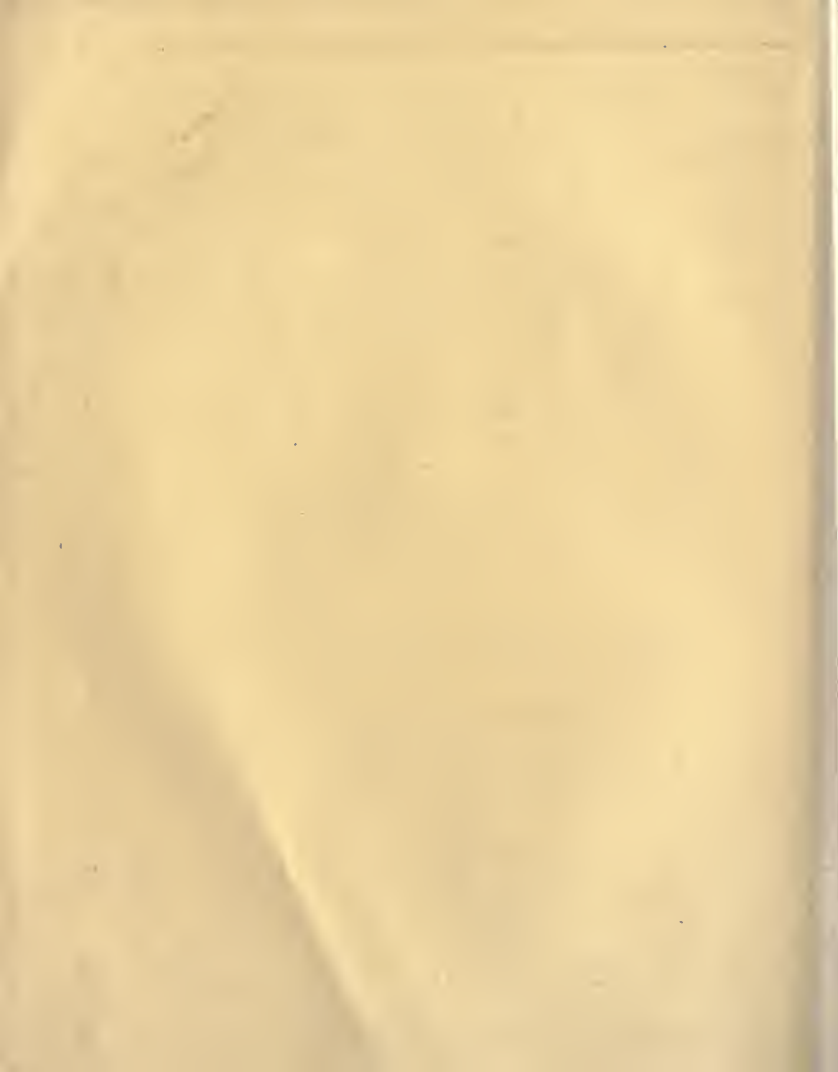
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