

STORIES
FROM
THE
EARTHLY
PARADISE



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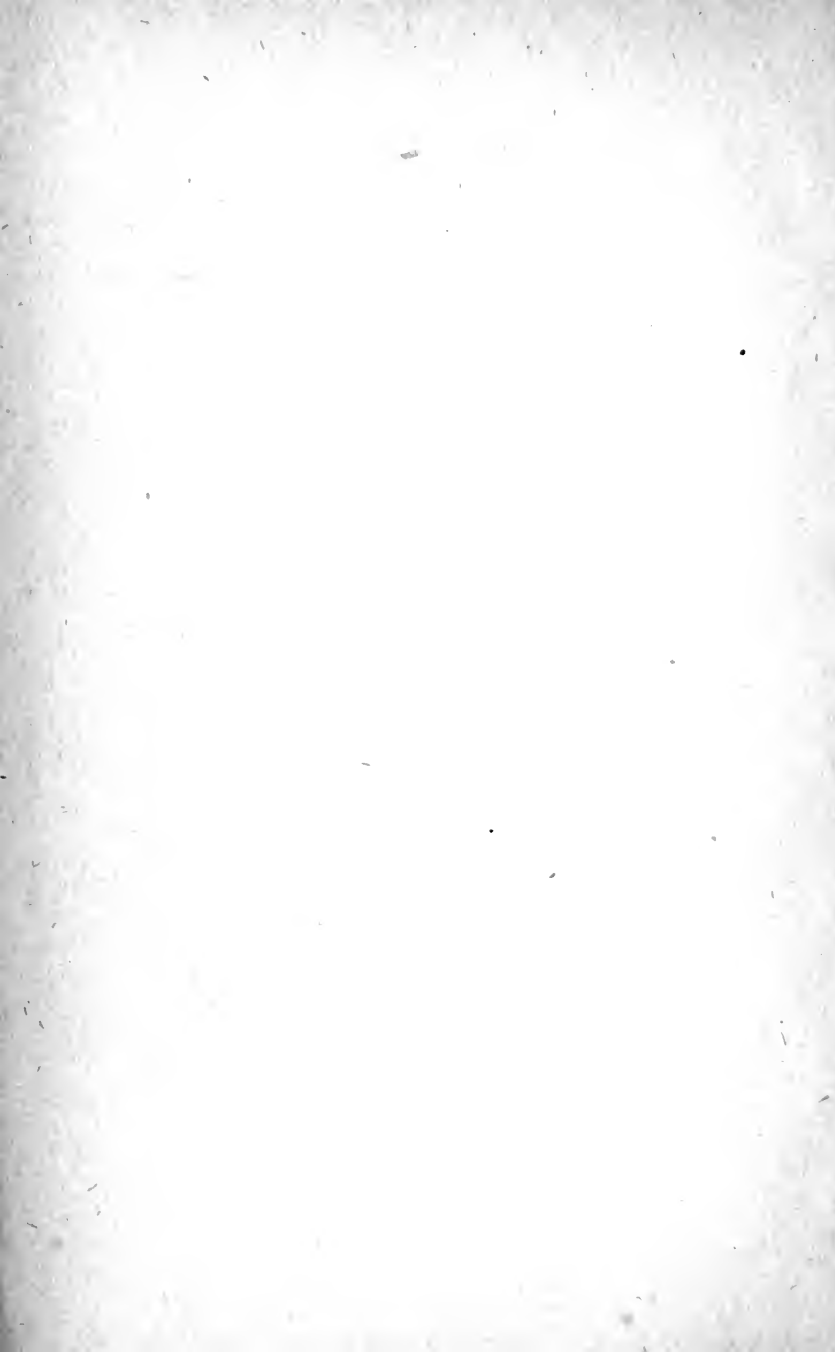
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STORIES FROM
THE EARTHLY PARADISE

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THE PRINCESS CICELY FINDS MICHAEL ASLEEP IN THE GARDEN (see p. 57).

STORIES FROM
THE EARTHLY
PARADISE
BY WILLIAM MORRIS

RETOLD IN PROSE BY C. S. EVANS

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CONTENTS

	PAGE
INTRODUCTION - - - - -	1
ATALANTA'S RACE - - - - -	7
THE MAN BORN TO BE KING - - - - -	19
THE SON OF CRÆSUS - - - - -	65
THE WRITING ON THE IMAGE - - - - -	78
THE LADY OF THE LAND - - - - -	90
THE PROUD KING - - - - -	100
THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS - - - - -	116
THE STORY OF RHODOPE - - - - -	131
THE LAND EAST OF THE SUN AND WEST OF THE MOON - - - - -	152
THE DOOM OF KING ACRISIUS - - - - -	180
OGIER THE DANE - - - - -	211
THE MAN WHO NEVER LAUGHED AGAIN - - - - -	228

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

	PAGE
“THE PRINCESS CICELY FINDS MICHAEL ASLEEP IN THE GARDEN” - - - <i>Coloured frontispiece</i>	
“ATALANTA . . . WAVERED FOR A MOMENT, THEN RAN TO PICK IT UP” - - - - -	15
“HE SAW THE SQUIRE DROP THE CRADLE IN THE WATER”	31
“‘WAIT, ATYS; I COME, I COME!’” - - - -	75
“HE REACHED HIS HAND TO THE SLIM NECK OF THE QUEEN AND UNCLASPED THE GOLDEN COLLAR” - - -	87
“SMITING BLINDLY AT THE HORROR WITH HIS SWORD”	97
“HE STOOD OUT TRANSFIGURED, GOD-LIKE, IN THE GLOW”	125
“RHODOPE SAW THAT HE HELD IN HIS TALONS ONE OF THE GOLDEN SHOES” - - - - -	139
“PRESENTLY SHE PICKED UP THE SWAN-SKIN AND STOOD IDLY SMOOTHING ITS FEATHERS” - - - -	157

INTRODUCTION

WITH Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris stands at the head of that little group of so-called "æsthetic" poets, whose work exercised so great an influence upon the literature of the latter half of the nineteenth century. Born in 1834, of well-to-do parents, at Walthamstow, he was educated at Marlborough, and later at Exeter College, Oxford. There he came into contact with Burne-Jones, already in revolt against the accepted canons of art so far as painting was concerned, and the friendship that ensued confirmed in both young men that taste for the romantic and the archaic which they were to develop along such different lines. With Morris, other, and perhaps stronger, influences succeeded, but they were all in the same direction. The art that most interested him was the art which claimed beauty as its sole end and aim, and which sought for beauty in things remote from the realities of common life. The spirit that animated Rossetti and Swinburne was the impulse that stirred Morris also, and although he never attained to the emotional depth of the one, or the sheer mastery over sounds and images which characterized the other, yet he succeeded in throwing over all his work that glamour which surrounds the memories of ancient times and ancient men,

and in the mind of an artist constituted as he was, forms the tissue of a delicate and haunting beauty.

“ Dreamer of dreams, born out of my due time,
Why should I strive to set the crooked straight ?
Let it suffice me that my murmuring rhyme
Beats with light wings against the ivory gate,
Telling a tale not too importunate
To those who in the sleepy region stay
Lull’d by the singer of an idle day.”

His first book, “ The Defence of Guenevere and other Poems,” published in 1858, displayed very markedly the tendencies which were working within him. The verse was strangely musical, and of a sweet, almost a cloying beauty; but the emotional content was poor, and the subject-matter was the stuff of dreams. To say that the poems were lacking in vigour would be a false criticism, for vigour they were never intended to have; they were “ tales not too importunate,” somewhat pallid and enervating, but nevertheless with a proper charm of their own.

After the publication of this volume, Morris abandoned literature for a time, and became occupied in a project which had for its aim the establishment of “ the house beautiful ” by carrying the principles of Pre-Raphaelite art into the domain of house decoration. A factory was started for the production of artistic wall-papers, tiles, and tapestries, and for the design and manufacture of domestic utensils of beautiful and harmonious shape. Himself no mean painter and craftsman, Morris was for long the guiding spirit of the concern, and the value of the work he did, both directly by the production of beautiful objects, and indirectly by raising the standard of popular taste, cannot be ignored.

In 1866 Morris returned to poetry, and in that year

published his "Life and Death of Jason," in which the old Greek legend of the Argonauts is told at great length in his own inimitable style. Between 1867 and 1870 followed the four books of "The Earthly Paradise," which are dealt with more fully below.

Morris's next long poem, the epic of "Sigurd the Volsung," published in 1877, shows a marked change of tone. The dreamy spell that brooded over "The Earthly Paradise," the languid melancholy and hedonistic charm, give place now to a virility and seriousness which is quite in keeping with the subject. The poem is based upon an Icelandic Saga, and although perhaps it will never be so attractive to the general reader as the earlier work, it contains elements that will probably cause it to endure longer in our literature. It speaks of life itself, rather than the visionary's dreams of it, of the clash of human fate and destiny, and while retaining all the marvellous pictorial qualities of "The Earthly Paradise," is more dramatic.

The decorating business which Morris had established continued to occupy him, with intervals, for the greater part of his working career. Towards the end of his life he became interested in typography, and founded at Hammersmith the Kelmscott Press, from which he sent forth some beautiful examples of English printing. With these activities he continued for a time others connected with propaganda for the purpose of social reform, and he instituted a kind of æsthetic socialism which found a great following. Two of his prose works, "News from Nowhere" and "The Dream of John Ball" belong to this period, and picture his vision of a regenerated society; but Morris's idea of Utopia is more transcendental even

than such visions usually are, and has even less connection with the realities of human existence. Among his other prose works "The House of the Wolfings" and "The Story of the Glittering Plain" may be mentioned. These romances are really essays in style, archaic and more than a little precious; but into the glittering stuff of them he has woven that sense of enchantment which makes all his work delightful. These were followed, in 1895, by "The Wood beyond the World," "Child Christopher," and a verse translation of the Saxon poem "Beowulf." His last work, "The Well at the World's End," was published in 1896, the year of his death.

In "The Earthly Paradise," perhaps the most characteristic of his poetical works, Morris followed the model set by Boccaccio and Chaucer. It consists of a Prologue, twenty-four stories in verse, two for each month in the year, and an Epilogue. The various months are prefaced by descriptive poems, some of them of wonderful beauty, and the narratives are woven into a coherent whole by the story of the Wanderers which is related in the Prologue—pilgrims who have set out to seek a strange land beyond the Western Sea, an Earthly Paradise where beauty reigns for ever, and no man grows old.

But although in the structure of his poem Morris followed the older models, the resemblance ends there. Like Boccaccio and Chaucer, he found the subject-matter of his tales in often-told legends of a bygone time, and, like them, he presented a new thing when he had passed the raw material through the crucible of his art. But in Morris, it is not the story so much as the embroidery of the story that is the essential thing. It is not too much to say that, considered merely as stories, these gleanings

from Greek myth and Norse Saga are spoilt by the telling. One misses the fine directness of the one and the robust vigour of the other. The wind that blows even over the snowy plains of Morris's northern scenes seems to come laden with the warm and enervating perfume of exotic flowers. His characters are cut all to one pattern: they are dreamers or vague figures in a dream.

Yet "The Earthly Paradise" has a compensating quality that is individual and arresting (if a term so positive can be applied to work which is soothing rather than stimulating). That quality can only be described as beauty; but it is a beauty different from that which has made the old stories live—the beauty of essential truth, perhaps. Morris's stories bear the same relation to their originals that the rose superbly painted bears to the living flower. Both stir the artistic and imaginative faculties, but in a different way. The real rose gives pleasure to the senses by its form and colour; but the painted rose sounds the depths of subconscious memory, and gathers round the image of itself the essentials of all the roses one has ever seen. By the sensuous charm of his imagery Morris wraps the mind of the reader in an atmosphere of glamour, and by his very unreality and remoteness achieves his effect.

Of the twenty-four stories of the original, ten have been retold in this book. Copyright has prevented my dealing with a certain number, and of the remainder several seemed unsuitable in their subject-matter and treatment for a book intended for boys and girls. Seeing that most of the stories which form the basis of Morris's tales are legends well-known in other versions, I have considered that there was no point in presenting the stories baldly

and shorn of any indication of the poet's peculiar method of treating them. I hope that the book will be read with interest for the stories it contains—and, indeed, they are of the world's best; but I hope, too, that it may serve as an introduction to the work of the poet. With this aim in mind, I have reproduced, as far as I could, the poet's own imagery, and have not been dismayed by the fact that, in the change from poetry to prose, that imagery may seem sometimes disproportionate and high-flown. These are stories from Morris's "Earthly Paradise." Had I treated them in any other way they would not have been true to their title.

It is through our natural love of a story that we are led to appreciate the highest and best in literature. That was Lamb's justification for his famous stories from Shakespeare. Let it also stand as the justification of this book.

C. S. E.

STORIES FROM "THE EARTHLY PARADISE"

ATALANTA'S RACE

ONE day a young Prince, whose name was Milanion, went forth to hunt the wild boar in the woods bordering his father's kingdom. Towards noon, having found little sport, and not having chanced to kill a single beast, he gave up the chase, and walking onward to a place where the wood thinned, saw in front of him a fair city, which he had never seen before. He went towards it, thinking to find an inn where he might get food and wine, and as he came nearer, saw to his surprise that the gates of the city were wide open, with no guard or men-at-arms to question the goer-out or the comer-in.

Entering through the wide gates, Milanion found the streets at first quite deserted, but as he drew near the centre of the city, he overtook a number of people, all hurrying in the same direction. Following them he came at last to a large open space, whither they were bound, and there his eyes fell upon a strange sight.

The place was evidently the arena in which were held the athletic games and trials of strength, for it was surrounded by seats, rising tier on tier. In those seats were crowded together apparently the entire population of the

city, and although the arena itself was empty, the silence and the eager attention of the people showed plainly that some exciting event was toward.

Milanion mounted to a vacant seat, and stared around him curiously. At one end of the arena, under a rich canopy of cloth-of-gold, sat the King on his throne, surrounded by his counsellors and lords. Before him on a pedestal was a golden image of the sun, and a silver statue of Mercury, the swift-footed god, while in the arena below stood a brazen altar, on which flickered a thin flame. Close to the altar stood a burly man, half naked, leaning on an enormous sword twined round with yellow flowers.

But it was not on any of these that the eager gaze of the people was fixed, but on the figures of two runners toeing a mark and waiting the signal to race. One of the runners was a handsome young man, slim and fair, with fresh colour and well-knit limbs. The other was a beautiful maiden, clad like Diana of the woods. Her face was calm, and her grey eyes were fixed steadfastly upon the spear that marked the goal, but the eyes of the young man who was to run against her were turned towards her, and he seemed to have no other thought than to watch her face.

Suddenly the loud blast of a trumpet gave the signal to start, and the two sprang forward like hounds from the leash. Neck and neck they ran until nearly half of the course was covered, and then gradually the young man began to forge in front. A cry of joy broke from the watching crowd, but it was short-lived, and a deep groan followed as the maiden easily caught him up, and, scarcely seeming to make an effort, reached the winning-post while her adversary was still many yards behind.

There she stood quietly, her face still set and calm, her breath coming gently, as though she had not stirred herself at all.

At the sound of the trumpet which announced her victory, the young man stopped short in his course, and for a moment stared about him wildly. Then he made his way towards the place where stood the man with the sword, and without a word knelt before him. The great blade, stripped now of its yellow blossoms, flashed in the sun as the giant heaved it up, and a silence as of death fell upon the crowd. In the midst of it the maiden walked towards the kneeling man, casting him an indifferent glance as she passed. He raised his white, appealing face to hers for one last look; at the same moment the blade fell, and his head rolled upon the ground.

Burning with curiosity to know what this strange scene could mean, Milanion turned to an old man who stood close by, and asked him who the maiden was.

"Stranger," answered the old man, "her name is Atalanta, and she is the daughter of our King Schœneus."

"She is very beautiful," said Milanion softly.

"Aye," said the old man grimly. "And I pray God she soon may die, for that loveliness of hers has been the bane of many a fair young man!" He caught Milanion by the sleeve. "Stranger," said he earnestly, "I see that her fatal spell is at work upon you already. Take my advice before it is too late; go far from this accursed place and forget her utterly, for to love Atalanta is death, and you are over young to die."

Then the old man told Milanion Atalanta's story. She was the only child that King Schœneus had, and at her birth he had been grievously disappointed because she

was not a son. When she was only two or three days old the King had bidden his slaves take her into the woods and there abandon her to the mercy of the wild beasts. But the babe did not die, for a she-bear found her, and took her to its den, and brought her up with its own savage litter. Years afterwards the wood-folk killed the bear, and found Atalanta, then a well-grown maid of wonderful beauty and strength, and brought her to their village. For a time she stayed with them, and became a mighty hunter, for there was no beast in all the forest that could match her for strength and swiftness of foot. But at last she wandered abroad, and coming at last to King Schœneus's town, was recognized as his daughter by some sign she bore upon her body. There she stayed, increasing in beauty day by day, so that many young men were suitors for her hand in marriage. But Atalanta vowed that she would marry no man but one who could outrun her in a race, and, her heart being fierce and ruthless, she made also this condition, that any who tried and failed should meet death in that very hour by the headsman's sword.

"Since then," continued the old man, "many have essayed to win the Princess, but all have failed and gone to their doom. That young man we saw run to-day did better than any of the others, yet I think that Atalanta did but play with him, so that his hopes might increase, and he might suffer the more."

Musing over what he had heard, Milanion left the city, and returned in due course to his father's kingdom. There he tried hard to follow the old man's counsel and to put all thought of the maid and her fatal beauty from his mind. But it was all in vain. Each day his desire to see her

again grew stronger, and at the end of a month he once more made his way to King Schœneus's town.

On the morrow, so the people told him, Atalanta was to run another race, for yet another suitor had appeared, who thought to gain her for a bride. The good folk spoke of him with pity and murmured angry words against the cruel maid who had caused the name of their city to be accursed among the mothers of men.

But Milanion's heart beat quickly with a resolve newly formed, and when on the morrow he watched the scene in the arena, it was with no feeling of pity for the man who was so soon to die. One thought only filled his mind—the thought of Atalanta—for he had determined to put his fate to the test, and to try and win her.

No sooner was the race finished than Milanion left his place and began to push his way through the people towards the King's throne. Several among the crowd divined his purpose, and would have stayed him, crying to him to be wise and not to sacrifice his young life to the cruelty of the maid; but he shook them off, and reaching at last the foot of the ivory throne, knelt before the King.

Schœneus looked down upon him with sad and weary eyes. "What do you here, Stranger?" he asked. "Have any of my folk wronged you, or are you perhaps another of that misguided band who seek to mate with my daughter?"

"That last am I, O King," cried Milanion. "My mind is firm to make the trial. Either I will win her, or there shall be an end both of love and life for me. And fear not, O King, that either my victory or defeat will bring shame upon you, for I am of royal race, the son of old King Amphidamas, whose line is lofty as your own."

"Alas!" answered the King, and his eyes grew sadder than before, "I cannot bid you welcome since you are come for such an end. The dead who have died for my daughter's sake are too many already, and the thought of them weighs heavy on my soul. I pray you, give up this mad resolve. Is life not sweet that you would throw it away?"

"There are no words can move me," Milanion made answer. "I have counted well the cost, and my resolve is constant. Fix a day that I may make the trial, and let it be soon. Right glad would I be if it could be this very hour."

"Nay," said the King, "that shall not be. But in a month's time, if you still persist in your foolishness, the race shall be run. Meantime, Prince, rest here with me as my guest, and until the appointed day we will make merry, and forget all troubles to come."

But Milanion would not stay, for well he knew that there could be no rest for him until his desire was accomplished. He took his leave of the King, and wandered forth, and came in time to a temple of Venus by the sea.

The temple stood on the rocky shores of Argolis, at the very edge of the sea. Twice a day the ocean waves swept its very base, and, surging through the brazen doors, washed the white feet of the marble goddess that stood therein. Thither Milanion came, and with rich gifts bought from the guardian priests the right to stay.

And when the priests were gone, and he was all alone, he cast himself down before the feet of Venus and prayed to her:

"O Queen," he cried, "O Goddess, who art quick to help man and maid in their time of need, despise me not

now for that I am wretched and unworthy, but give me thine aid. Thou who art Queen of Love, teach me to win the love of Atalanta, and to humble her pride. Single-hearted I come to thee, O Queen, and thou knowest there is no base thought beneath my prayer, no hope of worldly gain, or ambition of worldly power. Surely it is a little thing I ask, and thou wilt grant it. Here will I stay to wait a sign from thee."

Then, stepping back from the altar, but keeping still his face turned towards the white figure of the goddess, Milanion leaned against a pillar and waited. Slowly the day waned, the blue faded out of the sky, and high-piled clouds of red and gold formed themselves in the west. A little wind arose, and the soft murmuring of the sea, now near its ebb, filled all the temple with soft sound.

Still Milanion stood motionless, waiting. The night fell, and the white rays of moonlight fell across the floor, but he moved not. Even when the temple maidens came, at midnight, to chant their evening hymn, he paid no heed, but remained with white, still face turned in mute appeal to the goddess who as yet had made no sign.

At length, long before the coming of dawn, Milanion felt that his prayer was about to be answered, and he turned with a joyful face to scan the sea. A faint light, not born of sun or stars, lit up the sky, and was reflected from the dancing waves. Slowly it grew brighter, until the whole temple was bathed in dazzling light.

Milanion staggered forward with upraised arms, his eyes blinded by the glory, and fell upon his face. And as he lay, not daring to raise his eyes, he heard a sweet voice speaking.

"Why dost thou fear, Milanion?" it said. "I am not

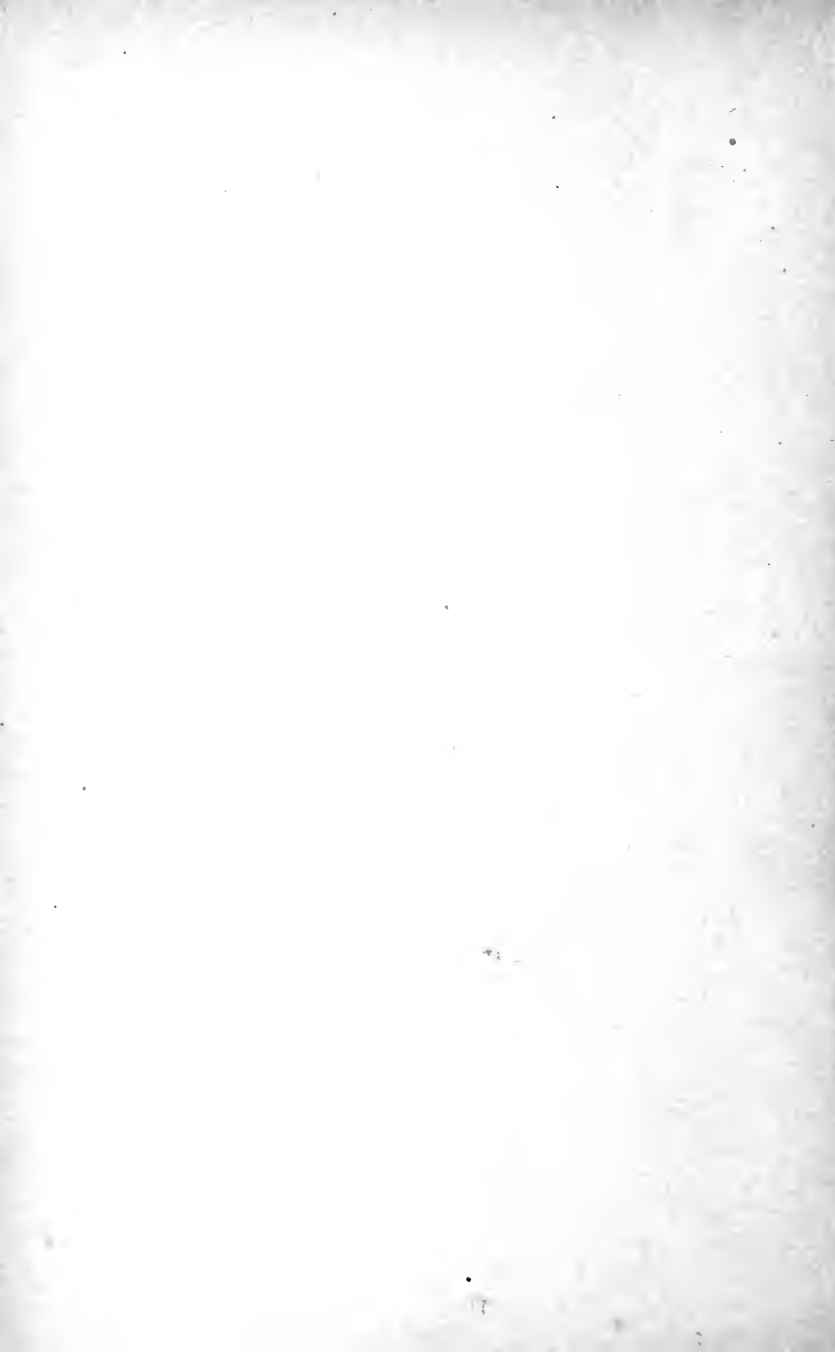
hard to those who love me, but only to those who do base things in my name. Listen to what I tell thee, and thou shalt live to save this maiden from a loveless grave. Here by my feet are three golden apples, plucked in the garden of the gods. They are beautiful to see, and they bring strange longing to all who behold them. Take them, and when thou runnest thy course, bear them with thee in a scrip. As soon as Atalanta overtakes thee in the race, cast one of these golden apples to one side, and as she turns to pick it up press on with all the speed thou mayest. And if she overtakes thee again, spare not to cast the other two abroad in the same way; so shalt thou win the race, and Atalanta for thy bride. Farewell, and in the time when thou hast won thy heart's desire, and thou seest for the first time Atalanta's eyes grow kind, forget not her who has helped thee in thy time of need."

The voice ceased, the radiance faded, and Milanion, wondering, raised his eyes. Nothing was to be seen but the pillared temple, now filled with the cold grey light of early dawn; but before Milanion, on the marble floor, lay three golden apples, for a sign that he had not dreamed.

And now the month of waiting had passed, and once again the arena was surrounded by the silent yet eager crowd, watching for the death of yet another victim. All was as before: the King aloft on his throne; the huge headsman with his mighty sword; the two runners toeing the mark. But now Milanion stood in the place he had gazed on twice before. His face was flushed with the sense of coming triumph, and he gazed at Atalanta not



“ ATALANTA . . . WAVERED FOR A MOMENT, THEN RAN TO PICK IT UP. ”



hopelessly as those others had gazed, but with a look of mastery in his eyes. The maid, too, was changed. No longer was her face indifferent and calm, for something seemed to tell her she had met her match at last. She cast down her eyes, and as the time drew near to start her heart beat wildly and her limbs trembled.

Suddenly the blast of the trumpet rang out clear and loud, and on the instant the two bounded forward. Fifty yards were run, and already Atalanta was ahead; but as she turned to cast one quick look behind, Milanion, without a word, drew a golden apple from his scrip, and cast it far to one side. Like a flash of golden light it rolled along the sand, and on the instant a strong desire arose in Atalanta's heart to possess the shining fruit. She turned aside, quickly snatched it up, and with redoubled speed hastened after Milanion, who had not faltered in his course. He reached the turning post at the end of the arena, but even as he stretched out his hand to touch it, he felt the fingers of the maiden under his, and knew that he was overtaken. At once he cast the second apple away. Atalanta stayed to watch it, wavered for a moment, and then ran to pick it up; nor did she take the course again until the golden fruit lay with its fellow in her bosom.

But now she knew by the frenzied shouts of the people that her adversary was near the goal. She saw him not fifty yards away from it; but even then there was no doubt in her mind but that she could win the race. Once again she bounded forward, swiftly as the wind, and ere he had covered a score of yards more was at his heels. Then Milanion, with all his strength, cast away the third apple, and at sight of it Atalanta forgot the race and

everything but the longing to possess the golden fruit, and within a moment of victory turned aside for the third time. All her speed could avail her nothing now. When she reached the post Milanion was already there, and his strong arms received her as she fell.

Now, what a shout of joy rang from the watching crowd, who knew the curse was lifted from their land at last. Advancing, the giant headsman lifted his sword and shattered it to pieces on the altar, while priests came forth to scatter incense, that the ghosts of the dead, who had died in that place, might be appeased.

And all the people rejoiced that at last the curse had been removed from their land, and that never more would they be called upon to witness Atalanta's Race. And, my story says, Milanion in good time wedded Atalanta, and they lived together happily for many years.

THE MAN BORN TO BE KING

I.

IN days of old there lived a King who was very powerful and wealthy. His people held him in great honour, and sang his praises far and wide, for under his sway they lived in peace, while neighbouring kingdoms, torn and racked by war, fell gradually into decay. Such was the prosperity of this mighty King that there were attracted to his country wise men from all over the world, who came to carry on their studies under his kindly patronage. To all of them he accorded a welcome; for it pleased his vanity to pose as a lover of learning. From each sage as he came, the King gleaned a little of his peculiar lore, until, as time went on, he himself became known as the King of the Sages. And that pleased him well, for he sought after praise and power more than anything else in the world.

Now, it chanced one day that this King held a feast. Clad in glittering array, he sat at the head of the board, and around him were placed the wise men who had settled in his kingdom. There they sat, all of them, from the greatest to the least, and the King surveyed them with pride, happy to think that so much knowledge and wisdom were at his command.

Suddenly the King gave a start, for among the sages

he noted a man whom he had never seen before. A little, wizened man he was, upon whose grey and shrunken face the years had graven many a deep line. His head was bald, and his chin beardless as that of a child; but his deep-set, glittering eyes seemed to burn with the fires of youth, and as the King watched he thought that they were lighted up by the knowledge of hidden mysteries. The strange guest spoke but little, and when he did speak scant heed was paid to his words; but the King did not fail to notice that now and again a strange flickering smile passed over his face, as he turned from the learned men and looked towards the royal throne.

Curious to learn who and what this old man might be, the King presently commanded that he should be brought before him, and as he stood before the throne, addressed him with courteous words.

"You give us pleasure by your coming, Stranger," said he, "for above all men we love the learned and the wise, whatever the object of their studies may be. What peculiar art is yours? Are you perchance a poet, skilled to tell in winged words the stories of a bygone time; or do you chronicle ancient wars? Do you read in the stars the fortunes and the destinies of men? do you seek the wondrous stone that can transmute all baser metals into gold? or are you skilled in the lore of healing, able to mend a shattered bone, to restore life to the sickly and give to them a length of years as great as your own? Whatever be your art or craft, declare it now, for whatever it be we shall love you for its sake alone."

"Little art or wisdom is mine, O King," replied the old man. "Few are the things of which I have a sure and certain knowledge, though in the pursuit of wisdom

I have toiled for many and many a year. At one time I thought that wisdom when attained would bring me near the likeness of the immortal gods. Now I am an old, old man, and but a few more months of life remain to me, yet in spite of all the knowledge I have gained I feel less like a god than when, years ago, in happy lusty youth, I tended my sheep, beneath the open heaven, on the windy down. You asked me did I read the stars. Yes, O King, and I am here to tell you something I have learned from them—something that concerns your own fate, and the sovereignty of this kingdom after you are gone.”

“Speak, then,” said the King eagerly. “Tell me quickly what you have to say.”

“Sire,” answered the old man, “it is this: Your ancient line, which has continued for so many years, shall soon come to an end. Your successor on this kingly throne will be no scion of a royal race. He will be no better born than I—and that is low-born indeed, for who my grandfather was nobody knows, and I cannot even tell where my father himself was born.”

The King laughed mockingly. “All this sounds very fine,” said he, “and it may or may not be true. But before I believe you, you must give me some other token of your power—something that I can actually test for myself. One thing there is known to me and to no other man beside. If you can tell me what that thing is, then will I acclaim you a mighty sage, and make you chief of those who read the stars.”

“Bid everyone stand back from the throne,” said the old man, “and I will tell you the thing you thought hidden from all men. Then if you believe me—well, I

ask no gift but leave to return whence I came. But if you do not believe me it is no matter, for what is written in the heavens will surely come to pass."

Thereupon the King rose, and bidding his courtiers remain in the hall, led the way to a garden shaded with olive-trees. "Now, my friend," said he, "speak, and make an end of this folly."

The sage bent forward and fixed his glittering eyes upon the King. "Listen, then," said he. "Under this very tree, a year ago, in the heat of the day, stood Antony. You handed him wine in a jewelled cup. He drank—and found death. He was the most trusted of all your friends, but he knew too much. He it was who at your command led the Earl Marshal Hugh to his death in an ambush of foes. He knew too much—so you poisoned him here, O King, on this very spot, with wine in a jewelled cup."

The King glowered at the old man beneath frowning brows. "Ay, he knew too much," he said, "and so do you, old man. What now if I cry, 'Help, the magician slays me!' Twenty sword blades would in a moment be sheathed in your body, and you, too, would cease to be a menace to my peace!"

The old man laughed. "Not thus, O King, shall I die," said he. "My fate, too, is written in the stars. For many a year yet death shall pass me by—perhaps because I fear him not, and call for him to give me rest of my weariness. Fear not, O King; no man shall learn this tale of me. It is enough that I have told it to you. Give heed to my words, and seek not to hinder the workings of destiny. Farewell!"

So saying, the sage turned on his heel and left the hall,

paying no heed to the gibes and sneers thrown at him by the King's men. Without once looking round, he left the palace and the town, and made his way back to his home among the hills.

Left to himself, the King remained for some time gazing moodily upon the ground. Then, with lowered eyes, he went slowly back to the hall. For him the glory had gone out of the day, and it was as though a black cloud had spread itself before the face of the sun, threatening storm.

II.

Days and months passed away, and the King, at first greatly disturbed by the sage's prophecy, gradually came to forget. Once again he took up his old life, living merrily amid the splendours of his Court, and in course of time he wooed and married a neighbouring Princess.

Now, it happened that about a year after his marriage the King rode out with a hunting-party into one of the thick forests of his domain. All day they followed the deer and the wild boar, and had royal sport; but towards sunset they started a deer larger than any they had seen before, and, sounding his horn, the King spurred forward in chase, calling to his men to follow. So intent was he on the quarry that he gave heed to nothing else, but rode forward so swiftly into the now fast darkening wood that he did not notice that his men were left far behind. The sun set, and the twilight grew into dark, but still the King rode on. The mighty deer was no longer in sight, and, suddenly realizing how late it was, the King checked his horse and looked about him. On all sides nothing was to be seen but the shadowy forms of the forest trees,

through the branches of which a few stars shone fitfully. There was no sound but the sighing of the wind and the stir and rustle of unseen things in the undergrowth. Putting his horn to his lips, the King blew a loud blast; but no reply came, and as the last echoes died away the silence fell deeper than ever.

Now the King realized that he was alone in a part of the forest he did not know. Dismounting from his horse, he walked forward in the hope of finding a path, but there was none to be seen, and after groping among the trees for some time he saw that he must resign himself to spending the night in that lonely place. As he looked about him for a sheltered spot the King suddenly spied through the branches of the trees a twinkling, far-away light, and, leading his wearied beast by the bridle-rein, he made his way slowly towards it.

Little by little the light grew stronger, until at last the King came out upon a cleared space of ground in the midst of which stood a poor tumble-down hut. The door stood ajar, and through it streamed the flickering light of a wood fire. Never had the splendours of the King's own banqueting-hall given him so much pleasure as the sight of that wretched hut. He pressed forward eagerly to reach it, but hardly had he left the shadow of the trees than a black form rose beside him, and he saw the figure of a tall and burly man, armed with a heavy stick and in act to strike.

"Peace, friend!" cried the King. "I came to do you no harm. I seek only food and shelter for the night in your hut."

The peasant lowered his stick. "My hut you may not enter," said he, "for my wife is ill and near to death.

But close by is a stable where you may rest, if you like, until the morning. As for food, it is little I have, but that you are welcome to share with me."

"Thanks," said the King. "You shall not lose by this night's work. I can and will reward you richly."

"There is no joy for me in that," said the man heavily. "Before this night is done I look to have such cause for sorrow that no amount of gold could put heart in me." He turned and led the way to the stable, where he motioned the King to lie down on a bed of straw. Then, going into the hut, he returned with a crust of hard rye-bread and a flagon of sour wine. These he gave to the King, and then, muttering to himself, turned and left him alone.

Never had the King tasted food so toothsome as that black bread and sour wine, nor ever before had a bed seemed so deliciously soft. He devoured every morsel of the crust and drained the flagon, then, casting himself at full length on the straw, sank almost at once into a deep sleep.

How long he slept he did not know; but suddenly he found himself wide awake, with his heart beating fast and a feeling of terror upon him. In his ears sounded the echo of a scream, as though a voice had called to him in his sleep. "*Take! take!*" the voice shrilled, and died away into silence.

Shivering with terror, the King peered into the gloom, but there was nothing to be seen. He rose from his bed, and, sword in hand, crept cautiously outside. The shadowed wood rose like a wall all round the clearing, but nothing was stirring, and no sound came to his ears except the soft sighing of the wind in the trees. Some-

what reassured, the King turned back to the stable and once again cast himself down to sleep; but almost as soon as he had closed his eyes the ringing voice came once more, and this time the words were: "*Give up! give up!*"

Bewildered, the King sat upright, straining his eyes into the darkness for the form that had uttered the strange words. But nothing was to be seen, and with a sigh he composed himself to sleep again. And as he slept he dreamed, and in his dream a figure stood beside his bed, and looked down on him with a grave and mocking smile. It was the ancient sage who had come to him in his palace months before. He seemed older than ever now, and his lined and wrinkled face inspired the King with a terror that almost made him cry aloud.

For a time the figure stood silent; then in slow, distinct tones it spoke:

*"Take, or give up! what matters it?
This child new-born shall surely sit
Upon thy seat when thou art gone
And dwelling 'twixt strait walls of stone!"*

At these words the King started into sudden wakefulness, only to find the stable empty as before; but the beating of his heart seemed to fill the place with sound. It was long before he slept again, for a sense of unknown terror filled his mind, and he tossed uneasily from side to side, pondering upon the mystery of his strange dream. At length merciful sleep came, this time sleep without a dream, and he knew nothing more until the slanting rays of the early sun smote his eyes, and he awoke to find himself shivering in the chill breeze of dawn.

Rising at once, the King went towards the hut to find

his host, for he was eager to get away from the place where he had spent so uncomfortable a night. He found the peasant kneeling in an agony of grief before a bed on which lay the body of his wife, stark and cold in death. And between the dead and the living lay a new-born baby, a beautiful boy, whose birth had cost his mother her life.

Like a flash the meaning of his dream came to the King's mind. In that helpless child lying by the dead woman he saw a terrible foe, the instrument of the fates to work the downfall of his royal line. There lay the King that was to be!

And what a cradle for a royal babe! Scornfully the King cast his eyes about the wretched chamber. The dead woman lay upon a bed of straw covered with a tattered coverlet. The floor of the hut was of beaten earth; the door alone let in the light; and there was no furniture save a wooden board standing on trestles and two or three stumps of trees that served as chairs. On the table stood a mess of porridge in a wooden bowl—a meal prepared for lips that never would touch food again; in the corner stood a wych-elm bow, a club fashioned of holly-wood, and one or two roughly made arrows, ill-pointed and spliced with thread. Often and often in the coming years the picture of that wretched home came into the King's mind, each detail as clear as he saw it now, and he saw in fancy the kneeling figure of the grief-stricken peasant and heard his tears as they pattered on the sack-cloth coverlet.

Hate filled the King's mind as he stood there gazing—hate the more relentless because born of fear. He took a step forward, but ere he could speak the sound of a horn rang from the forest outside, and he recognized his

own hunting call. His men had returned, and were searching for him. Soon he heard the sound of their voices calling to one another. He waited until the sounds came nearer, and then blew a blast upon his own hunting horn that in a few minutes brought his courtiers into the clearing.

All this time the peasant had remained upon his knees, oblivious of all but his sorrow. Hearing now the rattle of accoutrements and the neighing of steeds, he rose heavily to his feet, and stood gazing stupidly, first at the gaily-clad throng, and then at his whilom guest, whom he heard addressed by the title of King.

The King was the first to speak. "Sirs," said he, "you are welcome, though your coming be but tardy. But for this hapless woodman whom ye see, and who gave me food and shelter, your King would have been forced to spend a night beneath the stars. His service was great, and richer than gold shall be his reward. While I slept this man's wife died, leaving her child there to the uncertain mercies of the world. In payment for the service done to me by the father I will take the child and rear him as my own. He shall lie henceforth on fine linen instead of straw; his platter, instead of beechenwood, shall be of silver, and when he grows to be a man he shall learn to serve the King by deeds of arms. How say you, good man?" said he, turning to the peasant.

"Sire," replied the carle, weeping, "there is nothing for me to say but to consent, if such be your will. All my heart lies with the dead woman there. With neither wife nor child I shall be a lonely man henceforward, and to me all paths in life will be the same. Forgive me if I give you but paltry thanks, for indeed such is my grief

I cannot find it in my heart to thank Heaven for leaving me even so much of what it gave.”

Trembling in his haste to have his enemy within his power, the King paid no further heed to the shamefaced man, but, turning to one of his squires, ordered him to bring the baby, and to give the peasant a rich present of gold to help heal his sorrows. At the chink of the coin the peasant's face lit up a little, and, stooping, he drew forth from beneath the bed a rough wooden box. In this the squire laid the child, and, bearing it in his arms, remounted his horse. One glance the King cast on the wretched father who, with the tears still streaming down his face, was counting his gold upon the floor; then he gave the word to ride, and the whole troop moved off, leaving the peasant and his dreary face behind.

Moodily the King rode at the head of his men, weighed down by fear, and pondering upon the thing he meant to do. Passing through the forest, they came at last to open country, and saw the white road stretching before them. Along this they rode until they reached a deep stream spanned by a wooden bridge. An evil light came into the King's eyes, and, checking his horse, he turned and spoke to his men.

“ Ride on, sirs,” said he. “ The way is clear before us now, and there is no fear, in these my lands, of any hidden foe. As for me, it is my fancy to ride home quietly and at leisure. Squire Samuel, who bears the child, shall stay with me, and together we will seek for some worthy woman who will undertake the care of the baby till he grows old enough to come to Court. On the banks of this stream, or beyond, there is sure to be a house where such a person may be found.”

With downcast eyes and shamefaced look he spoke these words, and then drew rein to watch his men as they galloped past him across the bridge. When nothing was to be seen of them but a white dust-cloud in the distance he turned to the squire. The King's gaze rested on the wooden cradle the man still bore in his arms, and he noticed that on the side of it, red against a white ground, was rudely painted the figure of a lion. It looked as if it might be the crest of some noble lord, but within, on the straw, the child lay naked, and on his body was neither mark nor sign.

Then said the King: "You have served me well for many years, and before you your father served my father. My will is law to you, is it not so? Draw near, and listen carefully to what I say."

Wonderingly the squire obeyed, and side by side, at a gentle pace, the two rode on through the meadows. As they went the King opened his heart and told the squire everything, for above all men he trusted him. He told of the sage's prophecy, of his dream in the peasant's stable, and of the child who, so fate had decreed, was born to be King.

"Well, we shall see," said the King grimly, when his tale was ended. "Here and now will I put Fate to the test. Set the cradle in the stream and let it float. If in truth my ancient line is to be broken by this beggar's brat, let the high gods save him if they will. In any case his death will not lie at my door, for I forbear to shed his blood."

"So be it," answered the squire. "If he die, the sin will be upon my head; willingly I take it upon me, as earnest of my love for you. Yet think once more before



“ HE SAW THE SQUIRE DROP THE CRADLE IN THE WATER.”



I do this thing. The child may not die after all, but live, and in years to come you may meet him again. Who knows? It is ill meddling with the gods' decree. I counsel you to let the child go now, lest a worse thing than that you fear befall you."

"Peace!" cried the King angrily. "Let come what may, I care not, if only I may see the cradle whirling in the eddies, or bottom up, caught in the tangles of the weed." With that he set spurs to his horse and rode on, and, looking back after a little while, saw the Squire lean over the bridge-rail and drop the cradle in the water. He heard the splash and the child's frightened cry, and a moment or two later saw the box whirl past. It was spinning in the strong current, threatening at every moment to overturn, but yet holding the child safe and sound, and as the King's gaze followed it down the stream he wished that he had taken some more certain measures of ridding himself of his enemy.

Frowning, he rode homeward, saying no word until they were close to the town, when he bade the Squire draw near and chat to him carelessly, for he feared lest his brooding looks should breed suspicion in the minds of the people. But at the palace door a chamberlain brought news that banished all other thoughts from his mind. For while he had been away his Queen had given birth to a beautiful child, a girl.

III.

Fourteen years passed away, and gradually the memory of his deed ceased to prey upon the King's mind. Only now and again, in the quiet watches of the night, when

he lay sleepless upon his royal bed, the thought of the peasant's child returned to him and filled him with uneasy fear. But such thoughts usually fled with the morning light, and as the years passed by they came more seldom to torment him.

One beautiful summer morning the King rode out with a gay company to fly his falcons, and all unthinking made his way towards the self-same stream where the dark scene had been enacted fourteen years before. No memory of it came to the King now, for his mind was intent upon his sport; but seeing a mill close to the water's side, he determined to rest there and get refreshment for himself and his men.

It was a beautiful place, surrounded by an orchard in which were trees laden with an abundance of fruit. Some of them grew down to the very water's edge, and the apples glowing golden and red against the green overhung the stream which rushed roaring by to turn the great mill-wheel. The white walls of the ancient mill shook with the vibration, and to the noise of the water was added the rumbling of the gear within. Under the eaves doves cooed and sparrows chirped merrily among the trees.

With a sigh of content the King threw himself from his horse and called to the miller, who, bare-headed, came forward smiling, well pleased at the honour of having a King for his guest. In a few minutes a simple feast was spread upon the grass, cream and fresh honey and white new-baked bread, ripe plums from the sunny wall, and soft, wasp-bitten pears that for very ripeness had fallen from the tree.

When he had eaten and drunk his fill the King turned

smilingly to his host, a plump, red-faced man, with very short limbs and very long yellow hair. With him was a lad who had helped to serve the guests, a handsome boy about fourteen years of age, tall and slim, with clear, keen grey eyes and manly, upright bearing. So beautiful were his form and face and so fearless was his air that as the King looked at him he was reminded of a figure of Michael slaying the dragon which he had once seen in the painted window of a church.

“Why, miller,” said he, laughing, “you are happy to be the father of such a handsome son, but surely he favours his mother rather than yourself. Is your wife within? If so, bring her here, for if the boy gets his good looks from her she should be worth seeing.”

“Sire,” said the miller, bowing and flustered, “his mother is in the house, and I will fetch her immediately. But she is not his mother at all, saving your presence, and this boy is no son of mine, though in good truth I love him as a son. We found him fourteen years ago, a helpless baby, abandoned by his unnatural parents, and we adopted him as our own. Fourteen years ago! How the time flies, to be sure; it seems but yesterday.”

The man rambled on, but the King paid no heed. The smile faded from his face, and a heavy frown knitted his brows. Fourteen years ago! He knew now who this handsome youth was, and how he had come to the miller's house. Fate, then, was stronger than he; the gods had heard his challenge and had saved the child's life—once more to bring him within the King's power. The miller, misreading the King's frown, withdrew hurriedly to fetch his wife, and the King, looking up, gazed full in the face of the foundling. As their eyes met, a great horror seized

him, and his hand trembled so that he could hardly raise the cup of wine to his lips.

In a minute or two the miller returned with his wife, a little, worn, dark-haired woman who had never possessed beauty, either of face and figure.

"Come, wife," said the miller, "speak up and tell His Majesty the tale of how we found Michael there."

"Indeed, and it is a short tale enough," said the woman, bobbing and curtsying. "On this very day fourteen years ago I was riding from market homeward to the mill—and a lonely journey it was, for there were not so many people in those parts then as there are now, and fewer houses by the way. Well, as I rode along—and very weary I was, I remember, so that I could hardly sit upright, but leaned my weight against the panniers—all of a sudden I heard a feeble little cry. I looked all round to find the cause of it, and saw a naked child, afloat in a rough wooden cradle, in the stream. My heart filled with pity for the helpless little one, and, dismounting from my mule, I went to get him out. I had to wade waist deep to do it, but I reached the box at last where it was stayed by a tangle of weed. I was only just in time, for the cradle was on the point of sinking. As for the child, it was half dead already with cold and hunger, but I warmed him against my breast and bore him home to the mill. There we cherished him, my man and I, and saw him grow every day stronger and more comely. We had no child of our own, and it pleased us to think sometimes that the gods had taken pity on our loneliness and had sent us one to love. And, indeed, he brought love with him, and many a night, watching him at his play, have I felt a happiness I never knew before. No one

ever came to claim him, yet I have always the fear that some day I shall lose him, for it needs no sage to see that the lad is no common man's son. And now, Sire, I have told my tale. The lad's name is Michael; we named him so because it was at Michaelmas we found him. See, Sire, here is the very cradle in which he lay; I have kept it safe all these years."

Thereupon the woman drew away a cloth that covered the wooden box. Long before she did so the King knew what he should see, and for a moment he kept his eyes fixed upon the ground, his head leaning on his hand. Then at last he looked up, and saw the lion in red against the white ground, hardly faded with the lapse of time.

He glanced fearfully round at his men. "Which of these," he thought, "was present with me fourteen years ago?" And then he remembered that he was alone with Squire Samuel when the deed was done, and that no one but the Squire could have seen the blazoning upon the cradle, so carefully had he covered it with his cloak.

With a muttered word or two the King rose, and, remounting his horse, set off again for his castle. He strove to hide his uneasiness, and forced himself to laugh and joke with his courtiers; but nevertheless some of them marked his change of manner and wondered at it. Others noticed it, too, and remembered the scene at the peasant's hut years before; but they said nothing. If possible, they were more uneasy than the King, and they trembled every time his eye fell upon them lest he should surprise them in their knowledge.

Early the next morning the King sent for Squire Samuel, who still lived. A long time they were closeted

together, and when the Squire came out his face wore an ugly smile. "Happy are they who serve no Kings," he muttered, "and who, if they needs must damn themselves, may at least choose a profitable opportunity. What profit is in this? The child who survived the water before ever his lips had tasted food is fated to outlive this day as well." Thereupon he called an equerry to bring his horse, and rode off speedily towards the mill.

Michael lay by the mill stream, idly watching his float as it danced in the current. He was supposed to be fishing, but indeed his mind was full of all manner of wonderful thoughts. No word of his foster-mother's story had been lost on him. He had noticed, too, the strange glance the King gave him—a glance of wonder, almost, he thought, of fear. Surely he was destined to play some glorious part in life. Not for ever should he remain humble and unknown. He would go out into the great world, and do mighty deeds, and wear a sword, and serve a King. . . .

Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by the sound of hoofs, and turning quickly, he saw the King's Squire come riding towards him like a very figure out of his dreams. The old man, in despite of his years, sat his saddle with dignity. A richly embroidered cloak fell from his shoulders, and a long plume was fastened with a jewelled clasp to his velvet cap. At his side was a long sword in a richly ornamented scabbard, and round his neck hung a golden-hilted dagger with a silver scroll coiled round the hilt, on which were inscribed in black letters the words:

"Strike! for no dead man cometh back!"

For some time the two stood staring at one another,

Michael in eager admiration, the Squire with a growing sense of uneasiness and fear. "No power on earth can stop this lad from fulfilling his destiny," said he to himself as he gazed at the handsome, earnest face. "In spite of all the King can do, this youth will not die until he has won the crown."

Then aloud he said: "Tell me, boy, is the miller within? I have a message from the King, and must speak to him at once. The message, I think, concerns you, for surely you are the miller's son."

With that the lad threw down his rod upon the grass. "My father is in the house, sir," he answered, "waiting while his men saddle the mare, for he is to ride to town to-day. I will take you to him in a moment; but first let me make your horse fast in the stable."

A few minutes later the worthy miller came to the door and stood bowing uncomfortably, wondering not a little what this unexpected visit could mean.

Squire Samuel drew a scroll from his pocket. "Read this, my good man," said he, "and fear not to do what it commands, for see, it bears the King's seal."

The miller took the scroll and stood staring at it, scratching his head in perplexity. "Alas, sir," he said at last, "I am unlettered and cannot read a word. Just let me call my good wife; she can read well enough, if the letters be large and well made."

"Nay, friend, it is no matter," said the Squire. "The King's seal is there, and you need no book-learning to recognize that. For the rest, I will tell you what is in the scroll. Know, then, that the King has sent me to bring away this lad of yours, for he has taken a fancy to him, and is graciously pleased to do both him and you

great honour. From to-day he is to be the King's man, to be near His Majesty at Court and to be enrolled in his service."

The miller heard him in silence, twisting his dusty hat round and round in his hands. "The King's will be done," he said at last, in a husky voice. "Truly the lad is no kin of mine, yet I love him as a son. I had formed plans for him—when I came to die he was to have this mill and all that belongs to me, so that he might live here a happy and peaceful life untroubled by want or care. Near by, too, is a sweet maid I had hoped would be a good wife to him. . . . I had made plans . . . yet the King's will must be done."

The worthy man turned away to hide the tears that filled his eyes, while Michael stood in a trance of delight thinking of the glorious future that was to be his. But Squire Samuel laughed scornfully.

"And do you think, O simple soul, that such a life is a life for one nobly born, such as the King deems this young man to be? Tell me, Michael, what do you think about it?"

Thus suddenly addressed, Michael wakened from his day-dreams and flushed red. "Why, sir," he stammered, "I am happy enough here. John, the ranger, says that I shoot so well with the bow that soon I shall be skilful enough to enter for the shooting-match at the town on St. Barnabas' Day, and perhaps—who knows?—win the bag of silver florins that is given as a prize. I should be happy indeed to do that. And for the rest, fair sir, I love this place where I have lived so long. Look at our river—it is full of fish. You can see the bubbles break as they rise to snap at the flies, and if you peer down

into the green pools you can see the hungry pike lurking in the shadow of the weeds. In the spring the swallows come to cheer us, and, after they are gone, the woodcock and the snipe. There is always something to delight in—the call of the birds in our orchard trees, the sight of a water-hen flying so low over the stream that its feet almost seem to touch the surface, the crying of the curlews in the meadows, and the chattering of the starlings. Indeed, sir, this place is beautiful all the year round, and it is small wonder that I love it well and shall hate to leave it behind.”

Squire Samuel eyed the boy grimly. “You show a churl’s breeding,” he growled, “for all your handsome face. Come, come, lad,” he added in a more kindly tone, “I will take you to a better place than this and to a fuller life than any you have known. Farewell, miller! You need not tell your neighbours of the good fortune that has befallen the lad. Let them forget him, and you try to do the same. In a year or two, when his fortune is made, he will not be very anxious to claim friendship with either you or them, I’ll go bail for that! And here—to heal your sorrow, take this bag of gold. There is enough to buy your mill and you into the bargain.”

He threw the purse at the miller’s feet, and turned to go, beckoning Michael to follow.

Every vestige of his glorious dreams had now faded from the lad’s mind, and he stood confused, not knowing what to do or say, as his foster-father, with tears in his honest eyes, bade him a broken farewell. For a time the two remained, hand clasped in hand, until the Squire, with an impatient stamp of the foot and a rough pull at Michael’s sleeve, reminded him that he was waiting.

Then, as the boy turned with hesitating steps to leave, out from the house rushed the old dame and clasped him impetuously in her arms. "Oh, my boy," she cried, "many is the hour of joy your love has brought me, but I pay for it all now in the pain of parting. Heaven knows I do not grudge you the grand life that is to be yours, and all my hope is that you may live happy. Yet, I charge you, do not banish us from your heart altogether. Think of us sometimes in the days to come, when you are a great and famous man, and remember that in this house, humble though it be, you had at least the best that we could give you, and more love than I can say. Farewell, my boy! You made us young again, me and my man there. We shall grow old quickly now that you are gone."

She could speak no more for the sorrow that choked her voice, but she clasped the lad to her, fearing to let him go.

"Come, come, dame!" broke in the Squire gruffly. "Enough of this nonsense. The day is growing late, and the King will be waiting for us. He will not sit down to meat until he has seen this new-found lord of his. And you, Michael, follow! I have lingered here long enough."

So, with slow and hesitating steps and many a backward glance, Michael went at last. He crossed the bridge, mounted the big grey war-horse behind the Squire, and without another word the two cantered away.

IV.

For a time they rode on in silence. In spite of the real sorrow he felt at leaving the miller and his wife, Michael could not help looking forward with curiosity and pleasure

to the unknown life in front of him, and gradually his regrets were displaced by the visions of a bright and glorious future that came thronging into his mind. Those sanguine thoughts of his might have been dispelled by one rough and sneering remark of his escort, but Squire Samuel was silent, too, and busy with thoughts of his own.

For an hour they rode on thus silently, beside the banks of the well-known stream, until at last they hit the high road that led to the town. But to Michael's surprise, hardly had they reached the dusty highway than the Squire turned his horse aside, and, crossing the river again by a wooden bridge (the same, had he known it, whence he had been thrown as a child), made towards the forest.

Michael, to whom every step of the way was known, did not fail to notice the change of direction, and to wonder at it. "Why, sir," he said, "does the King, then, live in the wood?"

"The King dwells where it pleases the King to dwell, young fool," answered Samuel bad-temperedly; "and, if you wish to know, it pleases him just at the present time to live with the Black Monks, not in the wood, but beyond it."

He struck irritably at his horse with his riding-whip, and dug his spurs viciously into the poor beast's flanks. "And may curses fall on the King, and you, too," he muttered in his beard, "for bringing me to such a deed when I should be at home praying for my soul against my dying day!" He spurred his horse again, more savagely than before. "Oh, aye, a curse fall on you all," he muttered bitterly, "and on the day that I was born!"

Thereupon he relapsed again into moody silence, thinking, perchance, of all that he might have been, and what

he was, and the weight of sin he would have to account for at no very distant day. The horse had now slackened speed, toiling up a heathy ridge, whence Michael could see on one side the forest stretching dark and thick, and on the other the sunny plain country they had left, bright with the green of grassy meadows and golden with fields of corn.

Now, the trees began to hem them in, growing closer together as they went on, until they closed round the wayfarers, shutting out the sun, and Michael, looking back, saw the golden light of the late afternoon shining in patches through the maze of green. The lad had never penetrated so far into those murky woods before, and, despite himself, as the gloom deepened with the setting of the sun, he felt a vague uneasiness stealing over his mind. Many an old wife's tale had he heard of the strange creatures that inhabited those shadowy recesses, and he peered fearfully into the thick undergrowth on either side of the way, half expecting at every moment to see the face of some ugly troll gazing at him from beneath the leaves, or to come suddenly upon a ring of dancing elves.

Nothing untoward, however, happened, and the two rode on until the twilight deepened into dark, and the silence of the dense wood hung like a cloud over them, for they had now come so far that even the summer wind was still, stifled by the trees. Michael turned drowsy, and began to nod in his saddle; but Squire Samuel remained wakeful enough, for his uneasy thoughts pricked him like a spur. Well he remembered the last time he had ridden through this wood, carrying with him the child beneath his cloak.

At last they reached the border of the wood, and came out upon a rough gravelly hill overlooking a narrow valley. From the ridge the ground sloped gently down to a small and sluggish stream overgrown with reeds and shadowed by alder-bushes. On the other side of the stream the ground sloped up again, and between oaks and hollies opened up a tiny glade. Squire Samuel recognized the place at once, and, dark as it was, he did not fail to see the wretched hut that stood at the head of the glade, roofless, and almost falling into ruin.

He drew rein, and sat for a time brooding, listening to the hollow call of the bittern as it cried among the reeds. Michael was awake now, and staring with wide eyes into the gloom.

“Get you down,” said the Squire gruffly, keeping his eyes turned from the boy. “The ground here is soft and marshy, and with the weight of the two of us the horse will sink into the mire. Get you down, and take the horse by the bridle till we reach dry ground on the other side.”

Glad of a chance to move his stiffened limbs, Michael slipped from the saddle and led the horse slowly down the slope. His spirits had returned to him now, and he sang to himself as he went, happy in the mere joy of strength and youth.

As they reached the bottom, Samuel clutched at the dagger that hung from his neck, and spoke again in a husky voice.

“My girths are working loose. Come and draw the straps tighter.”

Without noticing the change in his companion's voice, Michael did as he was told. He bent down to tighten the

straps, and at the same time the steel flashed in Samuel's hand, and the boy staggered back deeply wounded in the side. For a moment he stood swaying, his eyes filmed over with pain, yet gazing full on the Squire's face that was as pale as death; then he fell without a moan backward on the grass.

Leaping from his horse, Squire Samuel came and knelt over the prostrate form. Michael's eyes were closed, but he was still alive, for the Squire felt his heart beat faintly. Once again he raised the dagger to finish what he had begun, but ere it fell a sound startled him, and he sprang upright in terror. From not far away came the insistent tinkling of a bell, coming nearer and nearer. Seized with unreasoning fear, Samuel rushed to his horse and mounted. To his confused mind the bell was the signal of some avenging angel, and, striking spurs furiously into his horse, he galloped away without one look behind. Maddened by the pain, the beast rushed forward into the heart of the wood, crashing through thick growths that tore its rider's clothes and flesh. Never abating speed, and stayed by no obstacle, it dashed on, with foaming muzzle and eyes that shone red in the dark, until at last, coming to the wooden bridge that crossed the river the noble beast's heart burst, and it fell dead.

All that night Squire Samuel wandered by the skirts of the wood, his mind in a frenzy of remorse and fear of judgment. With the coming of the light, however, he found the road again, and, half dead, presented himself in the morning at the palace gate.

The King had not yet risen, for it was early, but, showing his signet-ring, Squire Samuel gained immediate access to the royal chamber, and with many a halt told what

he had done, hiding nothing, partly because he thought it wiser to tell the whole truth, and partly because he was too tired and too confused to make up a lie.

“ Yet the boy is dead,” he ended, “ you need have no fear of that, and the bell I heard was no doubt the bell of the angel that bore him hence to Paradise. So ends the prophecy, O King. You can rest in peace hereafter !”

The King scowled at him. “ I thought I had chosen a warrior to do my will,” said he, “ but it seems I was mistaken. You come to me babbling like a child, half crazed with fear, and with my purpose unfulfilled. Get you gone, and let me never see your face again.”

Later in the day, however, the King recovered his spirits, and began to think that perhaps Squire Samuel had not failed, after all. Certainly the boy was dead, for even if he had not died at once of his wound, there was little chance of help reaching him in that lonely place. Certainly he was dead, and the royal line would not be sullied by the beggar’s brat mounting the throne.

So the King sent for Samuel again, and was gracious and kind to him, and gave him a rich present of gold and jewels. But little good the Squire got from that, for before winter came he died, old in years and older still in wickedness. They gave him a splendid funeral, and laid him in a costly tomb beneath the minster choir, with a marble Saint on either side of his head.

V.

Four years passed away, and the King dwelt in peace and happiness, his only regret being that he had no son to reign after him. His only daughter was now eighteen

years of age, and in a land of beautiful maidens was accounted the most beautiful of all. Her mother was dead, and if the truth be told, the King did not mourn much for the loss of his wife. He kept a solemn face for a month or two, and then began to think of marrying again; for he had set his heart on having a son, so as to make perfectly sure that what the old sage had prophesied should not come to pass. With this intent, he sent an emissary to visit foreign Courts both near and far, and to bring him news of any Princess who was beautiful and healthy and fit in all things to be his wife. His search was successful, a fit mate was found and wooed and won, and the King once again settled down to enjoy a quiet and peaceful life.

But now the time came when the King's daughter, the Princess Cicely, was marriageable, and her father began to think of finding a husband for her. After some care and trouble he made choice of the son of a neighbouring King, and, not without some bickering, the two parents settled everything between themselves without in any way consulting the wishes of the young people concerned.

All being satisfactorily arranged, the King called his daughter to him, and told her that she was to go away for a time to a distant castle of his, for such was the custom in that country when a King's daughter was to be married. "Before a month has gone by," said the King, as he bade the Princess farewell, "you will see me again. And when I come to you I shall not be alone, for I shall bring with me the man whom I have chosen from among all others to be your husband." Thereupon he kissed his daughter, and she set out at once upon her journey.

Hardly had she departed than news was brought to the King that Abbot Peter, the head of the Black Monks who lived beyond the forest, had come to the palace and craved an immediate audience. The King was willing enough to see him, for above all things he was jealous of the honour he held among his people as a wise and just ruler. Accordingly in a few minutes the Abbot entered, bringing with him his sub-prior, Adrian, an old man of dignified and gracious presence, and a bodyguard composed of ten sturdy men-at-arms. The various requests he had to make to his Sovereign were granted almost as soon as asked, so that the audience was soon over. But when the Abbot would have made his adieus, the King stopped him. "There is no such hurry to depart," said he. "You and your monks must stay and eat with me to-day. As for your axemen, they can feast themselves with the servants below, and I warrant they will be able to do justice to the fare that is offered them."

He laughed, and cast a careless glance over the men-at-arms. "Good trenchermen, indeed," he added. "You know how to pick your men, Abbot; I never saw such a company of tall fellows. Do they come from the forest lands? If so, I must see if any others like them dwell there, for I should not be ashamed of such a bodyguard myself."

So he spoke, laughingly, but he paid no heed to the Abbot's reply, for suddenly he saw among the men one whom he knew only too well. Taller now, and clad not in rough home-spun as on that day by the mill, but warlike, in leathern coat and iron helm, Michael stood there—Michael whom he had thought dead, but who for the second time had brought his evil plans to naught. The

clear grey eyes that the King remembered so well gazed at him from beneath the steel headpiece, and despite himself the King's gaze drooped and fell, while his cheek blanched and he felt a tremor in every limb.

A moment only it lasted, and then with a supreme effort the King had command of himself again. With a forced smile he nodded to the Abbot's words as if he had understood them, and then suddenly turning full towards Michael, he said: "Raise your helm a little, my man, and let me see your face. I seem to remember you. Where do you come from?"

At once Michael lifted his helmet and showed his face, tanned by the sun and wind, and framed by his golden hair. Then, in a clear, manly voice he told the story the King knew only too well—of his ride with the Squire Samuel, of the latter's treachery, and of how he was left for dead. "Of what came after, my lord," he added, "none can tell better than the Sub-Prior Adrian, who saved my life on that day, and since has made a man of me."

"Speak on then, father," said the King.

"My lord," said Adrian, "it happened five years ago, when I was but a poor priest outside the Abbey walls. One evening a charcoal-burner's lad came to me in haste, saying that his father was dying, and begging me to go to him that I might say a prayer and quit his soul in peace. Without wasting a moment I set off, bearing with me the Host, and giving the boy the bell to carry.

"It was twilight by the time we came to the skirts of the pine-wood, and at each step we made the bell gave forth a heavenly tinkling. As we entered the shadows of the wood the boy became frightened, and began to tell me stories of elves and strange creatures that lurked

in the wood waiting to spring out upon the passer-by. But I reproved him for his fears, and bade him take heart, for that nothing could do us harm while I held in my hands that which even the beasts of the field held holy.

“ Suddenly, as I spoke, there came a stir in the wood ahead of us, and then plainly to our ears came the sound of a horse in full gallop, crashing through the branches. At this the lad was so stricken by fear that he stopped dead in the path, and seemed hardly able to move a limb. I had to chide him again. ‘ If you do not haste,’ I said, ‘ your father will be dead ere we can reach him. What, boy, do you think that anything can stay me when I bear the Host within my hands ?’

“ So saying, I smote my mule, and as the beast sprang forward the boy ran alongside, for he feared to be left behind. The next minute we came out from the wood into an open, marshy place, through which ran a sluggish stream, and there, prone on the ground, lifeless to all seeming, lay Michael here, with a dagger in his side and his life-blood staining the grass.

“ By dint of all our strength the boy and I lifted him and placed him upon the mule, and so, passing through a glade bordered by oaks and hollies, came at last to the charcoal-burner’s hut. It was a wretched dwelling, built of mud and wattles, and by the side of it stood a shed that once had been a stable, but was now roofless and almost tumbling down with age. Perhaps you may have seen the place, my lord. It stands in a part of the wood famous for hunting, for in the forest near by deer and wild boar abound.”

The King said nothing, but without raising his eyes, signed to the monk to proceed with his tale.

"Well," continued Adrian, "I laid the boy down within the hut, and finding that his heart still beat, though faintly, I withdrew the dagger and bound up his wound. Then, having shrived the charcoal-burner, who, by the way, did not die after all, I returned as quickly as I could to the Abbey, and sent a leech to attend to the boy's hurt. And whether it was this man's skill, or the youthful strength of the boy, I know not, but he recovered so soon that I was astonished, and before many weeks were over he was as strong as though he had never been wounded at all. As soon as he was able to move I brought him to the Abbey, and took pleasure in teaching him to read, for he was both willing and clever. Soon he could read Latin as well as the best of us, and I thought to make a good monk of him. But the boy had no wish to lead a monk's life, and our Abbot, seeing this, and noting the lad's grace and strength, said, 'So the heart is good; he can serve God as well with limb as with voice,' and gave him a spear to carry and a leather coat and iron helm to wear, and entered him among the Abbey's men-at-arms. Say, Michael," he ended, "have you that dagger with you that nearly let out your life? If so, pluck it forth, lad, and show the King, that he may know this tale of ours is true."

Pale and distraught the King sat through Adrian's tale, listening at most to a word here and there, for his mind was all confused. Now, as in a dream, he saw young Michael pluck forth the dagger. The light gleamed on the steel of the shining blade, and the King saw again the gold and green of the hilt, round which twined the silver scroll, with the words, "Strike! for no dead man cometh back!" It was his own gift to Squire Samuel,

drawn from his father's treasure-chest on that day five years ago. It stood to him as a symbol of his guilt and failure.

As he gazed the King hardened his heart. The immediate terror faded away, and was replaced by a determination to put Fate to the trial once again.

"A wonderful story, in truth," he said, smiling, "and I confess I am interested in the hero of it. You must give me this man, my Lord Abbot. I like personable men about me, and for the rest he will do better wearing my rose than pouring over dull books in your monastery. I will make his welfare my special care."

So it was arranged, and when, after having been well feasted, the Abbot and his men returned to their home, Michael remained behind as the King's man.

VI.

Ten days later the King sent for Michael, and when the young man presented himself before him handed him a letter.

"I have a charge for you," he said, "and on the way you carry it out will depend your future advancement. This letter is addressed to my daughter, the Princess Cicely, who is dwelling at my Castle of the Rose, three days' journey from here to the south. It must be delivered to her with all speed. For the first day's journey my Captain, Hugh, will go with you, to set you on your way, but after that you must proceed alone. Tell no man where you are going, and, above all, show the letter to nobody until you finally deliver it to my Seneschal at the castle. Do this errand well, and you may count

to-day as the beginning of a high career; fail, and I shall know my confidence has been misplaced. You will start at once."

Michael bowed, and, taking the letter, proceeded to the stables for a horse. There he found the Captain Hugh already waiting for him, a swart man of brutal countenance, distinguished by a very surly manner and eyes that never smiled. He gave the lad no other greeting than a grunt, at the same time making signs for him to mount, and so, without wasting any time, the two set out on their way.

Now, whether the King, knowing his man, had chosen Hugh to be Michael's companion in the hope that his ill-temper and deliberate insolence might provoke a quarrel the consequences of which would be fatal to Michael, I do not know. Certainly the King gave no special commands to his henchman; yet if it had not been for Michael's unfailing serenity of temper, which gave the fellow no excuse for bad blood, there might have been a tale to tell. As it was, they came to the end of the first day's ride without any open breach. There, at the cross-roads, Hugh reined in his horse, and, taking off his feathered hat, made a low and mocking bow.

"I turn to the west here," said he. "You go southward, to earn, I doubt not, honour and an earldom. Farewell, fair sir! Mind you stare not too hard at the Princess, else you may find yourself in the castle moat or dancing upon nothing with a halter round your neck."

With a harsh laugh he set spurs to his horse and galloped away, while Michael, paying no heed to his taunt, pressed on, his head ringing with the thoughts of the honour and glory that awaited him. That night he found

shelter at a little inn, and soon after sunrise the following morning was on the road again.

All that day he rode steadily forward, and being now on a well-frequented highway he found much to interest him and to divert his thoughts. Now, he passed a party of labourers, bent with toil, wending their way to the fields. Again, a sturdy yeoman nodded him a bluff good-day, or a white-coiffed housewife, on her way to market, mounted between the panniers on her pony's back, smiled good-humouredly at him. Towards evening he entered the gates of a busy city, and having found an inn, rested there until the morning.

The third day's journey led through less-travelled roads, and so speedy had been his progress that before noon, mounting the brow of a hill, he saw in front of him the Castle of the Rose, set round with vineyards and gardens, its massive red towers rising from the thick foliage and the sun gleaming on its gilded vanes.

He soon reached the castle gate, and, crossing the drawbridge, which, from the look of it, had not been raised for many a year, halted before the massive archway leading into the courtyard. There, in the shadow of the archway, lay the warden, fast asleep. In one hand he held a harp, and at his feet lay a fishing-rod, with a big golden carp still at the end of the line.

Roused perhaps by the clatter of hooves upon the bridge, the sleeper after a moment or two opened his eyes and yawned. At the same moment, seeing Michael, he rose lazily, and asked him who he was and what he wanted.

"I come from the King," answered Michael, "as you may very well see if you look at the badge on my coat.

I am the bearer of important letters to the Seneschal, and I will trouble you therefore to lead me in to him."

The warder yawned again. "All very well," said he, "but just at the moment the Seneschal happens to be at dinner, and until *that* is done not the most important letters in the world would bring him forth. So you must e'en wait, fair sir. Besides, what's the hurry! Tie up your horse near the gate and come and sit down here with me for a while, and you shall hear me sing my favourite song, '*The Kaiser lieth on his bier.*' Oh, you may laugh, but I am a famous singer, I assure you, and if you don't like that ditty I can give you another. There is more than one arrow in my quiver, I would have you know!"

"Friend," said Michael, smiling, "you shall sing me these songs another time, and right glad shall I be to listen to them; but now, I pray you, lead me in, and show me some place where I may await the Seneschal."

"You had best go into the pleasaunce," answered the warder. "It is a grand place to spend an afternoon like this. We call it Dame Bertha's pleasaunce, because it was made for that very same lady for whom this castle was built. She has been dead now for many a year. God rest her soul!"

"And how shall I find the pleasaunce?" asked Michael.

"Why, as for that, you cannot miss it if you do as I say. When you come to the end of the courtyard you will find three steps leading to a path beneath the wall. Follow the path, and at the end of it you will come to a gilded wicket-gate leading to the garden. Enter, and rest yourself there, and as soon as the Seneschal comes forth from the dining-hall I will come and let you know."

Michael thanked the man, and, tying his horse to a pin in the courtyard wall, went the way he had been told. Soon he pushed open the gilded wicket-gate, and entered the fairest garden he had ever seen, ablaze with all the glorious flowers of June. For a time he wandered here and there, taking pleasure in the soft summer air, until at last he came to a fountain, where he stayed for a time, leaning over the marble basin and idly watching the gold-fish in the water. The noonday sun was hot overhead. He was tired with his ride, and the lazy tinkling of the water filled him with a pleasant drowsiness. He sat down on the grass to rest, and in less than three minutes was fast asleep.

Now, it chanced that in another part of the garden the Princess Cicely was walking with one of her maids, and, drawing nigh the fountain, they beheld with surprise a young man sleeping on the grass. The Princess was at first a little startled, but the maid stepped forward softly to see who the intruder might be.

Presently she came running back, her bright eyes dancing with glee, and before the Princess could speak a word laid her finger on her lips.

“Hush!” she said; “do not speak, but come and look. Did I not tell you your lover would come to woo you ere your father brought him?”

Frowning a little, but very curious, the Princess allowed the laughing maid to draw her forward. Her eyes fell upon the face of the young man, and in that moment she knew that, come what might, she would love him, and him only, for ever. For a few minutes she stood gazing, her heart full of a mingled joy and pain that brought the tears to her eyes, then, sighing, she turned away and signed to the maid to follow.

But that young lady was both curious and daring, too, and, seeing the scroll which Michael still held in his hand, she stepped forward, and, withdrawing it gently from his loosened grasp, opened it and began composedly to read. As she did so, the smile faded from her face, and she cast a look of pity on the sleeping youth.

"Read this," she said, handing the scroll to the Princess. "Oh, sad, sad, that such a fair young man should meet such an awful fate!"

With trembling fingers the Princess took the scroll, and read these words:

"To Sir Ralph, Seneschal of our Castle of the Rose, greeting:

"He who bears this is our enemy, and his life is forfeit. We therefore charge thee, as thou holdest us lief and dear, that thou shalt put the messenger to death straightway, and set his head upon a pike a furlong from the gate, that we may see it on our coming hither.

"So perish the King's enemies!"

The Princess read, and as her eyes gazed upon her father's name and seal she knew what she must do. Panting, she turned to the maid. "Wait you here," she said in a voice that was suddenly grown hard. "Watch him carefully, and if no one comes let him sleep undisturbed; but if anyone comes, or if he wakes of himself, tell him everything, and hide him in a safe place. See you fail me not, for if you prove unfaithful to this trust, much as I love you, death shall be the least of the evils with which you will be punished."

With that, she turned and ran swiftly to the castle,

and, hurrying to her own chamber, took from between the pages of a book a royal scroll similar to the one Michael carried, signed and sealed, but otherwise blank. Then, with a hand that never trembled, she took a pen and wrote the following in a fair clerkly script:

“ To Sir Ralph, Seneschal of our Castle of the Rose, greeting and health:

“ This is to let thee know that at this time we are moved to wed our daughter. He who bears this is our good friend, a youth of high lineage, whom we have chosen to be her bridegroom. We charge thee to ask naught of him, and to make no delay, but on the very day thou hast this letter let him and the Princess Cicely be married. This done, thou shalt see that all take the oath of fealty to him, and use themselves towards him with such obeisance as is due to our son-in-law and heir. Herein fail not, but prove thyself to be trusty and true, as we have hitherto found thee to be.”

At the last word the Princess started, for she heard the stir of the company leaving the dining-hall. There was no time to waste. Quickly fastening the scroll, she ran down the stairs, the far-off voices and footsteps sounding like thunder in her ears. She reached the fountain unobserved, and found Michael still sleeping, with the maid standing by. But now all her courage seemed to desert her. Her limbs trembled, and she turned faint and pale. Seeing this, the maid caught the letter from her hand, and slid it gently into Michael's grasp. Then she drew the Princess away, and led her to a summer-house in the garden. There she left her, while she hurried to the

castle for wine and other restoratives. Returning, she passed the place where Michael had lain asleep, but it was empty now, and, looking back, she saw a great bustle and stir, and a coming and going of people about the doors of the castle hall.

The Princess Cicely was looking very white and faint when at last she came back to her.

"Come, drink this wine," said the maid, "and take heart, or you will ruin all. More than this young man's life—your love and life's happiness depend upon your courage now. Let love drive out fear, and do not shrink to face the Seneschal boldly."

"You are right," said the Princess; and she took the wine and drank, and her friend rejoiced to see the blood again rise to her cheek.

A moment later they heard the sound of voices, and knew that messengers had come to summon them to the hall.

"Courage," whispered the maid again, as they rose to go in. "Keep a bold face, and speak little, and all will yet be well."

VII.

When they reached the great hall of the castle, they found it already filled with a crowd of gaily dressed people. On the dais sat the Seneschal, a little heavy and red-faced after his dinner, and many lords and ladies of high rank. The Princess passed to her place with lowered eyes, and not until she was seated at the Seneschal's side did she look up, to meet the gaze of the stranger fixed full upon her. His face was flushed, and his eyes bright, but his bearing was calm and full of a manly dignity. He knew

by this time the contents of the letter he had carried, and, if truth be told, was not greatly dazzled at his good fortune. It was all of a piece with the strange fate that seemed to shape his life. He remembered how once before he had been raised to a high pinnacle of hope in a glorious future, only to be dashed from it and to suffer pain and disillusionment. Perhaps this adventure would end in the same way.

Suddenly the Princess looked up, and his eyes met hers, and in that moment he forgot everything else, and saw naught but her and the gracious beauty of her face.

Now the Seneschal called for silence, and read aloud the King's message to the wondering throng. The Princess's face, as she listened, grew rosy and white by turns, but when Sir Ralph turned to her, having made an end, she was quite calm again.

"Prince," she said, addressing the young man, "you are welcome here. I have heard my father's wishes, and I shall obey. Be as kind to me as I would be to you." And, so saying, she gave the young man her hand.

But he, his eyes filled with sudden tears, fell on his knees before her. "O Princess," he cried, "I would die for you!" And as she stood looking down on him, while all the Court was silent, there came suddenly the clang of the wedding-bells from the minster tower, followed by the sweet voices of the choir-boys singing the marriage hymn.

All was ready now, and the Bishop came with his golden mitre on his head to lead the procession to the church; so, rising, Michael took the Princess by the hand and led her forth proudly before them all.

While these things were happening at the Castle of the

Rose, the King sat within his palace miles away, once more a prey to brooding doubt and fear. News had been brought him that very day that the young Prince to whom he had thought to wed his daughter was dead, slain in some miserable street quarrel, and in that death the King saw once again the workings of the Power that brought all his plans to ruin.

At last it drew near the time when the King had promised to meet his daughter, and he thought it best to carry to her himself the news of her prospective bridegroom's death. Accordingly, he set out with all his company, and after two days' journey came near to the gate of the castle. Now he remembered the orders he had given, and looked eagerly for the head of Michael that should have stared at him from the top of a spear. Nothing of the kind was to be seen, however, and as each yard of the road was passed, the King's frown grew deeper.

Suddenly a burst of merry music was heard in the distance. Drums beat, fifes played shrilly, and the merry voices of young maidens were upraised in song. Rounding a bend in the road, the King saw with angry surprise a gay pageant coming to meet him. A number of beautiful girls led the procession. Behind them marched the minstrels, gay in their brightly coloured coats, each man playing with all his might, while behind them again could be seen the pennoned lances of the knights and the gleaming helmets of the men-at-arms.

The King reined in his horse, and sat frowning, wondering what all this could portend. As the procession came near, it opened out into two lines, and down the lane thus formed came his daughter Cicely hand in hand

with a young man clad in royal robes, and with a princely crown upon his head. No need to look and see whose face that was under the golden circlet. Once again his enemy had triumphed, and the King felt his heart grow cold.

“What is this?” he cried, scowling. “What play is this ye bring me?”

None answered, for at sight of the King’s frowning brow a sudden fear fell upon the company. The Princess Cicely, who alone of them all held the clue to her father’s secret, stood pale and trembling.

“Come, what is this?” cried the King again, more angrily than before. “Sir Ralph, answer! Did this young man bring you a letter from me?”

“Aye, sir,” answered the Seneschal, “and I have obeyed you in every particular. The two were wedded on that same day, as your letter commanded.”

For a moment the King was silent, thinking hard. For a moment the fierce anger surged up in him, but suddenly the desire came upon him to cease struggling against Fate, and to acquiesce in a destiny he could not control. When at last he spoke, his voice had taken on a new and kindlier tone.

“You did well,” he cried. “A true servant have you proved in this, as in smaller things. From this day you shall wear the collar of your King, and men shall bear a Duke’s banner before you in the tourney and on the battlefield!”

He turned to the waiting crowd. “Behold my son, and the heir to my crown!” he cried. “He shall bear my shield, and sit equal with me upon my throne. I charge you, do him reverence well, and doubt not of his

royal race because he came to you, as was my will, clad in a servant's guise. I tell you, he is of older lineage than mine own, for his forbears reigned as Kings and lords in that far-off Asian land that is near to Paradise, ages ago, ere man had learned the gift of corn !"

He leaped down from his horse, and while the people made the heavens ring with their cheering, gave the happy lovers his blessing. And as they knelt before him, remorse for the past filled his mind.

"How happy I might have been," he thought, "if I had been content to leave these things alone, and had not counted myself fit to war against the will of God ! What days of calm peace and happiness might have been mine, instead of those fretful days of constant brooding and fear ! All this I have sacrificed for my sinful pride; and now I am an old man, and the last of my days on earth is very near. Well, what is done is done. I will strive to live better in the years left to me, and, looking neither forward nor backward, find joy in the peace that at last has come to me."

Gently he raised the couple, and, having kissed them on the brow, gave the order to turn.

So, amid the sound of music and joyous song, began the new King Michael's reign; and in his time, says the story, there was no King in all the world so wise and good as he.

THE SON OF CRÆSUS

CRÆSUS, King of Lydia, had but two sons. One of them was dumb from birth, but the other, whose name was Atys, grew up to be a strong and handsome youth, well worthy of the noble race from which he sprang, and the King loved him more than all else beside.

Now it happened that one night, as King Cræsus slept, he dreamed a strange and troubled dream. He thought he saw his beloved son lying dead upon a bier, with many folk around him weeping and wringing their hands. The King heard them say that some iron thing had struck the blow, but so confused was the dream that he could not tell how the Prince had died, whether in peace or war, nor by whose hand.

Three times in the same night this dream occurred, and after the third time the King was certain that it was sent to him as a warning. He therefore rose from his bed, and spent the rest of the night in pondering how he might avert the threatened danger; and, since the Prince was now of an age to wed, he made up his mind at length to search for a wife for him. "With her," thought the King, "he may dwell happily his life long, and be content to forgo the glories and perils of war; and though he will lack the praises men give to him who is mighty in the field, yet the love of home and wife will be recompense enough."

So the very next morning the King sent his men to search the neighbouring lands, both far and near, for a Princess worthy to be his son's bride, and at last they found, in a country close by the sea, a maid whose beauty was such that even the old Court dames could find no fault in any feature; and to her, amid much pomp and rejoicing, was Atys duly married.

For some time they lived together in peaceful happiness. The Prince never went afield either to war or to hunt, and the better to keep him content with his quiet life, the King gave orders that no tournaments should be held anywhere near the city. He further ordered that no arms should be displayed in the Prince's presence, and even caused to be removed from the walls and pillars of the palace the swords and spears that had been hung there, lest one of them might fall upon his son's head by chance. And with all this, the King did not fail to pray to the gods to avert the threatened doom. Many a beast he offered up upon their altars, and many a costly gift did he give to their priests.

Now, ere the Prince had been married many days, and while still the Court made merry at his wedding-feast, there came a man, a stranger from another land, and sat down upon the marble steps before the palace door. No word he said, but leaned his head upon his hands as though some great sorrow weighed upon him, paying no heed to the curious glances and questions of those who passed him by. But presently the King came forth with his son and his son's wife, and then the stranger rose and clung to the King's gown, and looked up at him with wild eyes.

"What man are you?" asked the King; "and why do

you kneel before me? Have you some foe among my men, and do you come seeking vengeance; or have you done some wrong to me or mine, for which you seek forgiveness? One or the other of these your wild looks seem to warrant. But perhaps it is only that you have need of gold, and have found courage to come and beg it of us? Speak!"

"King," said the stranger, "it is none of these things, yet I am sadly in need of help, and have come hither, drawn by your fame and greatness, to crave it. Sire, my name is Adrastus, and in the country of Phrygia my father is a King. Now have I neither country nor friends, and all men hold me accursed, for only a few days ago, while playing with my brother in the place of games, I struck him by chance a mortal blow, and laid him dead before me. Help me, O King, to purify my soul."

At these words the heart of Cræsus went out in pity to the man before him, and he bade him remain and live within the city, promising that the very next day the priests should perform those rites and sacrifices which the gods demanded from one who had shed the blood of his own kin. "And for the rest," said the King, "there is in this city of ours many a true-hearted man whose friendship you may win, and many a diversion that will help you to forget the troubles of the past."

So Adrastus remained in the city, and the dread rites of expiation having been performed, the sharp edge of his sorrow was in time blunted, and he came to wear a happier face; and such was his gentleness and courtesy that he found no enemies, but many friends, and the King himself grew to love him.

But chief among all the friends of Adrastus was Atys,

the young Prince. From the first he had felt his heart drawn towards the unhappy stranger, and before long the two were as brothers. Many a tale did Adrastus tell the Prince of mighty deeds in forest and field, and as he listened Atys longed to leave his quiet, peaceful life and to seek glory like the heroes of whom he heard.

Thus a year went by, and then one day there came to the King a number of his subjects who dwelt among the woods on the farthest borders of his land. In those woods many fierce beasts, such as the lion, the bear, and the wolf, roamed at large, and took toll of the people's flocks and herds, not fearing to attack sometimes even the men themselves. But worse even than wolf, or lion, or bear was a monstrous wild boar, which had its lair within the woods, and wrought sad havoc to property and life. Never since the boar that Atalanta slew in Calydon many years before had such a terrible beast been known. He tore through vineyards and destroyed the ripening grapes, he trampled over fields of corn, and at sight of him the labourers fled, for they stood in great fear of his terrible tusks. And in this they were not to be blamed, for many a man and woman, wandering lonely through the woodland paths, had been set upon by the ferocious beast and killed.

So now the people were come to ask the King's aid in ridding them of this monster, and they prayed him to send Atys, his son, with a company of brave men to seek the wild boar in its very lair. "Great honour shall he win by such a deed," they said, "and his name shall go down beside those of the heroes of old—Hercules, who, unaided, slew the many-headed Hydra; and Cadmus, who prevailed against the monstrous brood sprung from the dragon's teeth which he sowed."

The King shuddered as he listened to their words, for well he knew how such a tale would appeal to Atys, and how eagerly he would seize the opportunity to win for himself fame and glory.

“ My friends,” he said, “ return to your land, and rest assured that I will aid you to get rid of this pest. I cannot send my son, for he is needed here to deal with weighty affairs of state; but you shall have a band of men, who will make short work of this boar. One thing, however, I charge you: tell nothing of this tale to any other person in the city, for if you do so I will not stir myself to help you one jot.”

With this pronouncement the messengers were forced to be content, and, bowing low, they left the King's presence. But before leaving the town, they entered a tavern to drink success to the promised expedition, and the more they drank the more their tongues were loosened, until at last they had told to many men the whole of the story in even greater detail than they had told it to the King. And the story, being too good a story to waste, was repeated from mouth to mouth throughout the city, so that before very long it came to the ears of Atys the Prince; and when he heard it, Atys was very angry, for he considered that a slight had been put upon him.

“ Father,” he cried, bursting into the King's presence, “ since when am I grown helpless or unworthy, that you deny me the chance to win fame and honour? How will it be when you are gone, and I come to reign in your stead? Will my subjects remain loyal to me—loyal to one whose sword rusts in its scabbard, and who knows better to hold the drinking-cup than the spear? What have I done that you should put this shame upon me?”

"It is out of my love for you that I have done it," answered Crœsus. "Well I know you brave and emulous of noble deeds, but what can bravery avail when a man's life is threatened by the high gods? O Atys, my son, a dreadful doom threatens you, and I would fain avert it if I can. Three times in one night I dreamed that I saw you lying dead, slain by some weapon of iron, with your friends weeping around your bier."

Atys laughed aloud. "And did the gods also say on what day I should be slain?" he asked. "The fate you fear for me is the end I most would crave—to die gloriously by stroke of war in the heat of battle, not to linger out a miserable inglorious life, and die at last of sickness on my bed. This were the death of a cow rather than a man. Yet even still I cannot see why you would not have me go upon this quest. There is no iron upon the tusks of the boar, unless indeed he goes clad in armour, Lydian wise. If it seems good to you to keep me from the dangers of war, let me at least seek glory in the chase."

At this appeal the King's determination gave way. "Well," said he, "I will not oppose you longer, for I think, after all, perhaps you have read my dream aright. Not by teeth or claws will you be slain, but by the weapon of some foe. Nevertheless, I will send Adrastus, my trusty friend and yours, to go with you on this hunting in order to protect you against any unforeseen danger. Go, my son, and bid him come hither before you make ready to depart." So the King said; but in spite of his words his heart was heavy within him, and he cursed the day that had brought the strangers to his land.

Presently after, Adrastus came and stood before the King, and Crœsus told him the tale of his dream and of

the fate he feared, and he charged Adrastus, by the love he bore them both, to guard the young man with his life, and to watch over him night and day. And Adrastus bade the King rest in peace, and promised, if need be, to lay down his life to shield his friend from harm.

The next morning the Prince rode forth at the head of a gay company, with Adrastus by his side. The young man was half wild with glee, and turned to wave a joyous farewell to his father, who stood looking down at him from a balcony of the palace. Then the little band galloped quickly through the town, followed by their troop of great boar hounds.

In course of time they came to the woods where the beast had its lair, and, guided by one of the men of the country-side, came at last upon its tracks. These they followed for nearly half a day, and then the sudden bay-ing of the hounds told them that the boar was sighted. At this sound the heart of every man burned with fury of the chase, and they rushed forward, Atys leading, eager to be the first to plant his spear in the boar's shaggy hide.

In a few minutes they burst out into an open patch of oozy ground. There the great beast stood at bay, surrounded by the dogs, several of which lay dead before him, dreadfully mangled by his sharp tusks, while most of the others were bleeding from some wound. As Atys burst through the trees, the boar saw him. His little red eyes glared with hate, and he lifted his shaggy muzzle, all flecked with foam; then tossing aside a hound that had suddenly sprung upon him, he lowered his head and charged straight for the Prince.

Atys stood calm and firm until the boar was within a dozen yards, then with a great shout he flung his spear

so straight and true that it was buried deeply in the beast's shoulder. Adrastus, too, cast his spear, and with even greater effect, so that the boar, checked in its charge, stood tottering and biting savagely at the shafts. Drawing his sword, Atys ran in to give the death blow, but at the same instant Adrastus, remembering his charge, and fearing that the boar might turn on the Prince in its death agony, threw a javelin aimed at its heart. Hardly had the dart left his hand than he gave a piercing cry, for at that very moment the Prince leapt forward, and the javelin buried itself in his side.

Adrastus ran forward and caught the young man as he fell, and withdrew the shaft from the wound. But it was too late. The Prince's spirit had already fled, and, seeing this, in despair Adrastus turned the weapon to slay himself. Even as he did so the horror-stricken huntsman rushed in, seized him, and bound him hand and foot; then, having made a bier of alder-boughs, they laid the body of the Prince thereon, and began their sorrowful journey homeward. That night they rested near the town of Sardis, and, travelling slowly all the next day, arrived in the evening at the city.

In the western chamber of his palace the King sat alone, feasting, though his heart was heavy with foreboding of the fate of his beloved son. Suddenly there came to his ears a long-drawn wail, the cries of the people, as the sorrowful cavalcade passed through the streets. The King set down his wine-cup, and, starting to his feet, stood, blanched and trembling, waiting for the news he doubted not, but yet feared to hear. A little later, the bearers of the dead entered, and silently laid the body of his son before him.

For a time no word was uttered. With ghastly face the King stared at the quiet form, then, turning to Adrastus, who stood bound between his guards, he asked simply:

“Is it you, O Phrygian, you whom I have loved and honoured, who have slain Atys my son?”

Hot tears burst from Adrastus's eyes. “Slay me now,” he cried; “give me over to thy tormentors. My soul was one with the soul of Atys, and he was more than brother to me, yet by my unlucky hand, guided by some jealous god, he died.” Then, hiding nothing, and sparing himself no whit, he poured out the whole sorrowful tale. And as he spoke, clear before his eyes one picture swam—the tangled trees of the woodland, the sodden trampled grass, and the body of Atys lying upon it. Over the King's face, as he listened, flitted many a change, from rage to blind hatred and utter hopeless despair; but he stood quiet, and his eyes never left the face of the slayer of his son.

When at last he spoke his words were quiet. “Your death would avail me nothing,” said he. “Not you, but the high gods have done this deed. I was too happy, and your heart is slain that mine may bleed. You were but the weapon in the high god's hands—the handle of the spear. He who cast the shaft sits far enough removed from any vengeance of mine.”

He turned to the guards. “Loose him, and let him go. I will not have his blood upon my hands. Alas! Adrastus, within my inmost heart I knew this thing would come to pass. Failing you, the gods would have found some other to do their cruel work. Would indeed they had done so, for I looked to you to comfort me in the sorrow my forebodings told me was to come.”

His voice changed. "Go quickly!" he cried. "I charge you, make haste to go, ere sudden madness come upon me. I am still a King, and there are many hands to do whatever I may command."

The bonds of Adrastus were loosened, and, covering his eyes with his hands, he rushed away. Through the palace gates he went, stared at in silence by the pitying crowd, and, hardly knowing whither his steps were turned, passed through the city gates and took the road along which he had already passed that day. The gathering night hid him, and no man followed, but the next morning a solitary woodcutter, passing through the glade where Atys died, started back with horror as he saw a ghastly face, with eyes of pain, staring through the thicket at the spot where the blood of the Prince still dyed the ground.

To the funeral rites of Atys came all the lords of Lydia and the country around. The pyre was lighted, and as the flames mounted high they and the King threw costly things into the flames, weeping and calling upon the dead Prince by name.

Suddenly among them appeared a man with tattered clothes and worn and haggard face. The marshals would have cast him out, for they knew him not and thought he was a beggar, but he broke from them and ran nearer to the flaming pyre.

"Surely the world is changed, since ye doubt who I am!" he cried. "Yet ye have called me princely before to-day. I am Adrastus, the son of Gordius, the great King, and I come as is my right to attend the funeral of Atys; who was my friend. O Lydians, ye have cast many a rich thing into these flames, but I will cast a richer still. Wait, Atys; I come, I come!"



“ ‘WAIT, ATYS; I COME, I COME!’ ”



So saying, he drew a knife from his side, and, leaping into the flames, slew himself with one mighty stroke.

So these two noble hearts, who in life had loved each other so well, in death were not divided, and the same flames consumed the bodies of both. And when the flames died down and the pyre was cold, the people gathered up their ashes, and enshrined them in a golden urn, whereon a cunning artist wrought this story of the hunting of the boar.

THE WRITING ON THE IMAGE

LONG ago, in the half-forgotten days of old, there stood in one of the streets of Rome a wooden image. It was roughly carved of cornel wood, and on the upraised hand of it were written these words: "Percute hic"—"Strike here." And many men passing by looked at the image, and read the inscription, but none of them knew why the words were written.

So, for more than two hundred years, the image stood there in the middle of that Roman square. The hot sun of summer blazed down upon it, and the warm breezes fanned it softly; summer passed, and the driving rains of autumn gave place to winter snows, yet still the image stood unheeding. Many generations of men were born, and lived out their little lives in mingled joy and sorrow. Many an Emperor and King rose to glory, and passed, leaving behind him nothing but a faint memory and a name. More enduring than they, through all the years the image remained, its upraised hand pointing to the sky, its blank eyes gazing on the men and women as they came and went.

Now, it chanced that one day there passed by a man from Sicily. He was a scholar, learned in the strange lore of Egypt and Babylon, and many were the wonderful things that he could do. As soon as this man saw the image he knew it for the work of a great sorcerer, long

since dead, and there was little doubt in his mind but that it guarded the secret of some mighty spell. But, although he came day after day to gaze at the image, loitering in the square until the passers-by noticed him and mocked at him, the scholar could by no means discover the secret which the image guarded.

One day, at noon, the scholar stood as usual gazing at the image. The day was cloudy, and the upraised, pointing finger stood out black against the grey sky. "There *must* be a meaning," thought the sage. "The master who carved that image with so much art could have made it speak had he wished, for he possessed the power. Why did he not give it a voice? Why did he hide his meaning in a phrase? Surely it must have been because he *feared* to make his meaning plain, lest thereby the spell he wrought should be undone."

As the scholar stood musing thus, the sun shone out suddenly from behind a cloud, and a ray of pale, watery light threw the shadow of the image on the ground. Idly the scholar's gaze shifted, and he watched the black patch of shade, marking how it grew deeper as the rent in the clouds widened and the light became stronger.

Suddenly the scholar gave a little cry and bent forward eagerly, his eyes fixed upon the shadow of the pointing finger. Then, raising himself, he glanced cautiously around, and having ascertained that he was alone in the square, drew his knife from his belt and carefully traced a circle in the earth, on the spot where the shadow of the finger lay. This done, he turned homeward, his eyes alight with triumph, his head throbbing with exultation, and, having reached his lodging, he went straight to bed and slept soundly all the rest of that day.

At midnight he awoke, and taking a pickaxe and a spade, repaired to the now silent square. The mark he had made was undisturbed, and he began at once feverishly to dig. Stroke after stroke he gave with the pick, working as quietly as he could, until he had broken through the stone pavement. Then, casting the pick aside, he took the spade, and began to dig in the soft earth and gravel.

Deeper and deeper he dug, until he stood shoulder high in the pit that he had made; then suddenly his spade jarred upon some hard substance with a loud metallic clang. Bending down, he cleared away the soil with his hands, and came at last upon a brazen ring, green with rust, and as thick as a man's wrist. The ring was set in a plate of copper, curiously carved with figures of men and beasts and inscribed with words written in an unknown tongue. Like the ring, the plate was green with rust, but the carving and inscription stood out plainly. The face of the scholar paled as he stared at the strange figures. Full well he knew that they were evil, and in spite of his desire to learn the secret of the image, he trembled at the thought of the awful consequences that might come to him if he lifted the plate and so carried out the wicked designs of the sorcerer who had set the image in its place.

There was little time to waste in thought, however, and steeling his heart, he set his hand upon the ring. To his surprise the plate moved easily from its place, disclosing a winding stone staircase disappearing into the shadowed depths.

For a time the scholar stood hesitating at the top of the stair. What awaited him below? Danger perhaps,

or terror, but most certainly wealth—wealth beyond his wildest dreams, the treasures of a King !

“ If I come out of this venture alive,” thought the scholar, “ I shall have little left to fear all the days of my life. I stand here a needy scholar, and all the wealth I possess lies in my hands and brain, but in an hour or two I shall surely be the richest man in all the land, able to take my place besides Kings and Princes and the great ones of the earth. What a palace will I build me then, rich with beautiful works of art, the wonder of the world !”

A little wind arose and moaned drearily across the mouth of the shaft. The scholar shivered as a new thought entered his mind.

“ But how if, gaining all that men most desire, I lose my own soul ? Well, then, if I can never enter heaven I will make myself a paradise here on earth—a sweet and lovely place, peaceful, with cloistered courts and trees and wells of bubbling water. I will lie on a bed of flowers beneath the warm sun, and gay companions shall be always around me to cheer me with music and laughter. So will I spend my days, happier than any King, until I come to die. . . .

“ And then ? . . . Who knows for certain what happens to us when we are dead ? It is likely that nothing at all happens, either good or bad. It is better to seize the happiness that awaits me here in the present, even though it last only a little time, than to reach out after uncertain joys. I will hesitate no longer, but go forward boldly to meet my fate, whatever it may be.”

So saying, the sage shouldered his bag (for he had brought a bag with him to contain the treasure he hoped to find) and began to descend the winding stair.

The first few steps were dark, and the dust of years gritted under his feet. Then, as he turned the first curve of the stairway, he came upon a lighted lamp, curiously shaped, that hung from the roof and shed a soft golden light upon his path. Here and there, as he went down, other lamps were hung, all lighted (who knew by whose hand?) and giving forth a strange sweet perfume. Now the sage could see that the walls were painted in bright fresh colours with figures of warriors, priests, and kings, enacting scenes from old legends long since forgotten.

At last he reached the foot of the stair, and there hung a curtain, its bordered edge inscribed in strange characters of reddish gold. Reaching out a hand, the scholar lifted the curtain and peeped cautiously into the hall beyond.

One look he gave, and then started back in alarm, for that first glance disclosed a lofty hall, hung round with gold, and a glorious company seated at the farther end.

The sage stood trembling, and all the doubts and fears that had possessed him at the beginning thronged again into his mind. Who were these men, and what were they doing there—if, indeed, they were men at all, and not fiends from hell?

As he stood trembling there came suddenly a cold blast of wind that in a moment blew out the lamps upon the stair. Darkness enfolded him like a garment, and in the silence and the dark came a terror greater than any he had felt before. He dared not return; the silence seemed full of whispering voices; unknown dangers seemed to await him in the gloom.

Once again he raised his hand to lift the curtain.

“How quiet they are,” he thought. “Perhaps after all they are only images set there by the Master Sorcerer who carved the wooden figure above.”

So at last, mustering up his courage, he lifted the curtain and stepped into the hall, facing the silent company at the farther end.

And now, as he drew nearer, he saw that he was face to face with a company of the dead. All were stark and cold, dressed in glorious attire, and disposed with such marvellous art that they seemed alive. Their very eyes were open, shining in the light, and staring with a blank, unseeing gaze.

In the midst of that silent company, at a table spread as though for a feast with costly dishes of gold and silver, sat an ancient King, whose grey beard descended to his breast. Next him sat his Queen, garbed in a beautiful green gown of some costly fabric. A massive collar of gold encircled her neck, and round her waist was a belt studded with flashing gems. On either side of the royal pair stood a lord, holding in his hands bread and wine, waiting as they had waited in life, to render service. Behind these again flashed the armour of the guards; minstrels sat at the end of the board, and numbers of serving-men stood here and there.

In front of the royal daïs hung a lamp by a golden chain. No flame burned within it, but within the fretted bowl was set a great red carbuncle, which filled the entire hall with bright clear light.

But the strangest figure of all this strange company was one that stood behind the King, about six paces from the daïs—the image of an armed man made in wood and brass. Its outstretched arm held a huge bow, with a

shaft ready on the string pointing at the flaming jewel in the golden lamp.

Wondering much what all these things could mean, the scholar crept about the hall. Wherever he went the dead eyes seemed to follow, and the mute question that seemed to lie behind their blank and awful stare filled him with such frantic terror that he almost screamed aloud. Time and again his envious hand stole out to touch a jewel or some costly thing, but his fear proved always greater than his greed, and he drew back cowering.

Gradually, however, the first shock of terror passed, and he felt himself grow calmer. "What a fool am I to fear the dead!" he cried. "I, who have seen living things whose very names no man can know, and whose shapes could bring more terror to the heart of a brave man than a lion prowling in the night. Time is flying. Soon the day will be here, and people will be stirring above. If I am to reap the reward of my venture, I must act quickly, and depart."

So saying, with a sudden, impulsive movement, he threw down upon the board, among the golden dishes, his shabby leather bag, patched in many places, but strong and serviceable; then, drawing near the figures of the royal pair, he seized a golden cup upon which the King's hand rested, and opening the mouth of his sack, thrust it within. The King's eyes stared at him unseeing. No affront could shame the monarch now. He was no better than the lame beggar who in old times used to wait at the castle gate for the scraps of food from the kitchen.

Nor did the scholar feel shame at this insult he had paid the dead. Boldly he reached his hand to the slim neck of the Queen, and unclasped the golden collar, which

slid down her unyielding body to the board. Next he removed the crowns from the royal brows, and having safely bestowed them in his sack, despoiled the table of all its golden ornaments. Unsatisfied still, he returned to the silent figures and stripped everything of value from their robes—the jewelled belt from the Queen's waist, the rings from her fingers, the brooch from her breast. The King he served likewise, and even the lords and serving-men yielded some small articles of treasure.

When he had finished, he shouldered his sack and staggered with it down the hall; but as he went his eyes fell upon a large green stone that lay upon the stone floor of the hall.

The scholar stopped, and his face lighted up with greed. "Come," said he, "here is a treasure worth more than all those I have already gained, and one, too, that will not add much to the weight of my sack. With this stone in my possession, I could set one half of the world fighting against the other half, and be master of the earth before I die. I will certainly not leave this gem behind."

So saying, he knelt to pick up the stone, which seemed to lie loosely on the floor; but to his surprise, when he attempted to lift the jewel, it remained stuck fast. Fuming with impatience, the scholar laid down his sack, and bending both hands to the task, tugged with all his might.

He pulled and pulled, yet still the stone resisted. It seemed as if some mighty force held it in its place. Suddenly, as he strained, the scholar heard a slight noise behind him, and, turning his head, saw a sight that turned his blood to water in his veins. The image of the armed man that stood behind the King was in motion. Its great arm bent the mighty bow.

Shrieking aloud for fear, the scholar loosed his hold of the precious gem, and, catching up his bag of gold, started to his feet. But it was too late. Before he could stand upright, the image drew the bow-string to its ear. There came a clang like the sounding of a mighty harp. The forked barb flew, struck the carbuncle in the hanging lamp, which came crashing down, and in a moment the hall was dark as pitch.

Half crazed with fear, the scholar fell to the ground, and for a time remained still, scarcely daring even to moan; then, finding that no further sound broke the silence, he rose, trembling, to his feet, and groped about the walls in search of the door by which he had entered. But he could not find it, for at the very moment when the lamp fell, the entrance had been sealed close, and the design of the Master Sorcerer who fashioned the place was accomplished.

Thus, in that underground hall, surrounded by the marvels he had seen and the wealth he had coveted, the scholar found the end of all things; and no man, of all who knew him, guessed what his fate had been.

But in the town that very same night, an hour before dawn, a dreadful storm arose. Peal after peal of thunder crashed, and the blue lightning darted like a flaming sword across the sky. One flash brighter than all the rest struck the wooden image, and destroyed it utterly, so that only a charred stump remained to show where it had been.

When the storm had passed, and the frightened folk came out of their houses in the morning, they wondered much to find the image destroyed, and the pavement at the foot of it all turned up and broken. They thought



“ HE REACHED HIS HAND TO THE SLIM NECK OF THE QUEEN
AND UNCLASPED THE GOLDEN COLLAR.”



this, too, was the work of the lightning, for the plate that covered the mouth of the pit was set in its place again, and the heavy downfall of rain had washed the soil over it.

Yet some idea of an evil purpose still remained in the people's minds, and in order to avert whatever fate might threaten, and to please the gods, they set up in the place where the wooden image had stood a statue of Jove, carved in white stone and thickly overlaid with gold.

At the time when this tale was first told, the statue still remained, so men said, as a witness to the truth of it, although, indeed, the gold had all vanished, having been stripped away by some needy lord. To-day, no doubt, not even a trace of the weather-beaten stone remains.

THE LADY OF THE LAND

A NUMBER of seamen from Italy once went sailing among the islands of Greece in order that they might trade with the people who lived upon them. Their voyage lasted a long time and proved a very prosperous one, but at last, having run short of water, they came to an island which was almost uninhabited except for a few poor fishers on the coast, and sailing into a land-locked bay, they set to work to fill their water-casks.

Now, they had been long at sea, and the sight of land was a pleasant one to those mariners; so that, when their water-casks were full, they strayed ashore in twos and threes to walk for a while among the woods. One of the sailors became separated from his companions, and, losing his way, struck ever farther and farther inland, until he came at last to a sheltered valley, overgrown with cypress-woods, in the midst of which stood a ruined castle.

It had been a fair place once, the home of some wealthy Prince or noble, and even now, many signs were to be seen of its former grace and beauty. The gardens, all overgrown with wild shrubs and weeds, had once been arranged in terraces, while here and there were marble-paved pools, the water in them green and stagnant, the polished steps cracked and stained. An eerie silence—a silence that could almost be felt—hung over the valley.

The seaman, half afraid of some dreadful thing among the trees, strained his ears for some sound that would give evidence of the nearness of man, but nothing rewarded him save the melancholy croaking of ravens overhead, the low murmur of the breeze, and, far away, the echo of a grey wolf's cry.

Shuddering despite himself, the seaman pushed on until he came to the ruined gateway of the castle. Its stones were mouldered and crumbling, yet above the door he could still see the sculptured device of the lord who had owned the place—a winged figure battling with a serpent.

Passing beneath the gateway, he entered a cloistered courtyard, upheld by graceful pillars sculptured with many an heroic tale of the golden age of Greece. Climbing weeds half hid the pillars, and some of the slender shafts were broken, it seemed wilfully, as though before the inhabitants of the place had left they had for some reason wrought such destruction as was in their power.

Leaving the courtyard, he entered a chamber wherein was a winding stair, up which he climbed to a high turret commanding a wide view of the country around. Far away he could see the bay, with his ship riding at anchor, and having taken his bearings, and being reassured, he descended again to make a more thorough exploration of the ruins.

This time his steps led him to a crypt, built beneath the wide hall of the castle. At one end was a door, and, strange to say, this door, unlike everything else within the castle, showed no signs of decay. It was well hinged and close shut, and the hasp of it was free from rust.

Moved both by curiosity and by the desire to find some

treasure which he imagined might well be hidden in that place, the sailor, after some hesitation, reached out his hand to try the latch. It yielded easily, and he entered a large room lit by a strange dim light, as from some hidden fire. The floor was of marble, covered with soft carpets of Indian silk, and the walls were hung with drapery beautifully patterned in many colours, and as fresh as when it first left the loom. Nor was this the last of the wonders, for ivory chairs of exquisite workmanship were set here and there, while in the corner of the room was a bed that seemed as though it might have been slept in only an hour or two before.

Now, the sailor felt a breath of wind fan his cheek—a soft, warm breeze, heavy with strange perfume that seemed almost to steal away his senses. Quite sure now that he was in the home of some enchanter, he began to tremble with fear, and turned to go away ere he could be overtaken by some magic spell. Yet, even as he made the first step, his eyes lighted on another door, and curiosity again overcoming fear, he ran forward quickly, threw up the silver latch, and entered.

There, indeed, lay the treasure he had hoped to find! The floor of that room was covered with great heaps of gold. Under foot were coins and medallions of all shapes and sizes; golden chalices stood on golden tables; great vases, richly worked, were filled to the brim with flashing gems; the very roof was overlaid with plates of gold, while costly hangings of gold-embroidered silk draped the walls. Never, in his wildest dreams, had the sailor imagined such a treasure! Surely in that chamber were stored the spoils of an empire, the gatherings of one of those marauding Kings of old who had plundered the

world! The seaman turned dizzy as he gazed, and he could not withdraw his eyes from the glittering heaps around him.

Suddenly a voice woke him from his stupor. It sounded as from an inner room, and, lifting his eyes, the sailor saw, at the farther end of the chamber, a wide archway, above which was figured the device he had seen on the castle gate. A prey to all kinds of hopes and fears, he hesitatingly passed through.

He found himself in a room paved with polished marble. In the midst of it was a pool filled with clear water, and on the steps at the side stood a pair of jewelled shoes and a silken robe. No more than a glance the seaman gave to these things, for a more wonderful sight still claimed his attention. Beyond the pool, at the end of the hall, throned in an ivory chair, sat a woman.

She was young and very beautiful, but on her face was such a look of pain and misery that the sailor's heart was stirred with pity. Her eyes were closed, and so wrapped was she in her thoughts that she had not heard the intruder's step upon the floor. Then suddenly she bowed her head and spoke aloud.

"Alas!" moaned she, "another day gone by! Another day, and no soul comes! Another year, and yet I am not dead!"

At the last word she lifted her head, and with wide-open eyes gazed straight at the man before her. For a time they remained, gazing in silence at one another. Then, using the Greek speech the sailor knew so well, the maiden spoke again.

"What man are you?" she asked sternly. "And what has brought you to this house of sorrow? Is it greed of

gold and envy of these treasures of mine? If so, beware, for, weak though I seem, I have many a spell to guard my own, and not lightly shall you win them away from me."

"Nay, lady," answered the mariner, "I am an honest man led here by chance, because I lost my way. My home is in Florence, and poor though I seem, my name is held noble in my native city. With certain companions I set forth on a voyage, not so much to gather treasure as to see strange lands, and, if chance favoured me, to win by noble deeds an enduring fame. Treasures, indeed, have I seen in these halls—more treasures than I thought were in the world—but the sight of your beauty has made me forget them all. You spoke truth, lady, when you said you had a spell to guard your own. Already that spell is laid upon me, and its name is Love. Tell me how I can serve you, and even if the cost of such service be my life, I will give it willingly. Nay, I will count myself fortunate if by dying I can bring back the smile of happiness to your eyes, that were not made to weep."

"These are brave words, sailor," said the maiden. "God grant they be not idly uttered, for, indeed, I am sore in need of help. Listen while I tell you my sad story.

"Many years ago my father was lord of all this land. A wise man he was and blessed by the gods, and by their aid he was enabled to amass great wealth. Therefore, when I was born, he vowed me to the service of Diana, and gave me into the charge of the priests in her temple. There I abode until my twentieth year, and there I should have lived until my dying day had I not incurred the anger of the jealous goddess. A young man saw me and

loved me, and, alas! I loved him in return. This was all my sin; yet because I had broken my vows Diana visited both me and mine with a terrible punishment. Within three years this fair land over which my father ruled was desolate, for he and all his people, some by pestilence and some from the arrows of invading enemies, were dead, and I was left in this castle alone.

“Would that I had died too! But a more fearful doom was reserved for me. Diana changed my fair woman’s form into that of a fierce and fork-tongued dragon, horrible to behold. Every night I range the island, or swim the seas with the strange monsters of the deep, but by day I lie drowsy within these halls, which were built by no mortal mason’s hand, guarding the dragon’s gold.

“Yet, since hope deferred can torture the soul more than any pain, the goddess Diana has allowed me one chance of escape. One day in every year, from sunrise to sunset, I am given my own form again, so that a mortal may see me and love me, and for the sake of that love may dare to do the thing that shall set me free. Oh, sailor, your eyes, I see, are full of tears with sorrow for my miseries. Are you brave enough for the task? Will your heart fail you at the test?

“Listen! This is what you must do to set me free. When this day comes to an end I shall once again take on the grisly dragon’s form. You must not wait for that, but go away and return to-morrow. Then when you see me in the dragon’s form, have no fear, but take my head within your hands and embrace it. In this way the spell will be broken, and I shall regain for ever my woman’s form. Now, go quickly, for the sun is getting low, and for this night at least I would have you think

of me in my true shape. Take this jewel, and look at it when you are alone; it will serve to prove to you that all that has happened is real, and that you have not been befooled by a dream."

So saying, the maiden drew from her breast a gem, which she gave to the mariner, and he, casting many looks behind, went at her word, proud that the chance of such happiness had fallen to his lot, and never doubting his ability to pay the price.

The next morning he arose, and clothing himself in his bright armour, made his way once again to the wood in which lay the ruined castle. As he passed through the crumbling archway a terrible roar sounded in his ears, and, trembling, he drew his sword and ran to the shelter of the cloisters.

Louder and louder the fearful roaring came, mingled with strident yells and hoarse moans. Then suddenly they ceased, and the man felt his blood turn to water in his veins as a thing, bearing in its reeking jaws the body of a slain goat, came out of the shadows at the farther end of the courtyard. At sight of him the dragon paused, then, dropping the goat, it came creeping horribly towards him, while he stood fixed to the spot with terror.

Nearer and nearer it came. He saw with horror the smoking hair upon its tongue, and at last, approaching within a yard of where he stood, it raised its head and showed the wrinkled skin upon its throat. At that he gave a wild cry of terror, and smiting blindly at the horror with his sword, shut his eyes and fled with a white and ghostly face. Half mad with fear, he dashed through the gateway and into the forest. Many a time he fell, bruising himself upon the stones and against the trunks of the



“SMITING BLINDLY AT THE HORROR WITH HIS SWORD.”

trees; but he took no heed of his wounds, for only one thought was present in his mind, and that was to get back to the ship again. And the dragon, seeing him go, made no attempt to follow, but, crying horribly, so that her voice was heard far out to sea, caught up in her jaws a block of stone and ground it into powder.

As for the man, he reached the ship in safety, and for three days lay raving and crying for death. On the third day he became quieter, and a drowsiness fell upon him, so that his companions thought him saved; but that night he awoke only to die.

His body lies at Byzantium, within the churchyard of the Genoese, and two blossoming pomegranate-trees are planted on his grave.

THE PROUD KING

I.

IN a far country many ages ago there lived a King of great wealth and power. Many a tributary King quaked at his very word, and the mere thought of his displeasure sufficed to keep the greatest of his lords awake all night. This King ascended the throne while he was still a young man. He was wedded to a noble wife, but she never sat at his side as a Queen should do. Such was his pride that he would even sit on the raised dais alone, while the Queen sat on the steps of the throne at his feet. As he grew older his pride grew greater, until at last almost his only thoughts were thoughts of his great power and awful majesty.

One morning in May the King awoke early, while the sun was still low in the sky, and as his custom was, began to tell over in his mind the list of his titles and the number of the great things he had done. He thought of the broad lands over which he held sway, and the thousands of subjects, both high and low, that owed him allegiance; and as he thought of all these things his vain heart swelled with overweening pride. "Truly," he cried, raising himself on his royal couch, "I am the greatest King this world has ever seen. While I live I am as God in this land, and there is no need either for temple or for priest."

As he spoke the foolish words a passing thought of the death that lays even mighty Kings low, crossed his mind, but so great was his vanity and pride that he put it aside. "Who knows," he thought, "even death may pass me by. After all, death is for the common kind of man, and not for me. My father was a mighty King, but I am greater than he was, and his kingdom was but a little thing compared with mine. His grandsire, moreover, was but a Prince of narrow lands, lord of a town where now stands the kennel of my dogs. From year to year the kingly line to which I belong has risen to greater heights of wealth and power. May not I, then, rise even higher yet? Tales there are of men who have won eternal life. May not I be one of them, and escape this death that comes to smaller men?"

Fatigued by such high thoughts as these, the proud King at last fell asleep, and did not awake again until the morning sun was already high in the sky. Then he gave orders to his men to prepare for a royal hunt, and an hour or two later, richly apparelled and accompanied by a brilliant train, he set forth into the forest.

Before long a mighty stag was started, and the whole company galloped in pursuit. The King, who was mounted on a steed worth a royal ransom, easily out-distanced his companions, and when at last he drew rein found himself alone.

It was now high noon, and the day was hot. The King was weary with riding, and, finding himself close to the banks of a river, he could not help thinking how pleasant it would be to bathe in the cool, clear water. Dismounting, therefore, he tethered his horse to a tree, stripped off all his royal robes, and began to disport him-

self in the water. The bathe was every bit as pleasant as the thought of it had been, and the King did not fail to enjoy himself to the full. At last he turned again to the bank, well pleased with himself and with the world that treated him so well.

It was not long, however, before these pleasant thoughts were changed to feelings of amazement and rage. The King could not find his clothes. Search as he might, not a trace remained of all his rich attire, and his horse had vanished too. He poured curses and threats of vengeance upon the thief who had thus dared to affront him, roaring loudly in his anger, but no voice answered him, only the birds flew affrighted from the trees, and wheeled around overhead.

What a plight now the wretched King was in! The hot sun scorched his bare skin until he began to roar again for very pain, running hither and thither in a frenzied effort to find his lost garments. At last, weary of crying, he sat down at the foot of a tree to rest, and while there suddenly remembered that close by was the house of one of his rangers, a lord to whom he had been especially friendly, and who owed all his wealth and estate to his favour. "I will go to him," thought the King, with relief. "He will lend me clothes, and give me wine and food and shelter from this fierce sun. Sitting within his cool hall I may even come to laugh at this unhappy adventure, though the thief who took my clothes, if ever I lay hands on him, will find the occasion little cause for joy."

So saying, the King rose up in haste, and taking a well-known forest path, arrived before long at the outer gate of the house where dwelt Hugh the Ranger, his vassal

and friend. A horn hung there, and on it the King blew a lusty blast.

Soon the footsteps of the porter were heard, as he crossed the paved courtyard. But before unlocking the gate the man peered through the little grating to see what manner of visitor desired entrance. At sight of the King standing there, bare as he was born, the porter let forth a great burst of laughter.

“What is the matter with you, friend,” he cried, “that you show us all your hide? We need neither fish nor flesh nor any other merchandise to-day. Get home and buy yourself a shirt at least. Why, even the beasts of the field, as our vicar truly says, are clothed; and will you be worse than they?” Then with another great burst of laughter the man turned on his heel to go away.

“Stay, fellow!” cried the King. “Open the gate at once. I am Jovinian, your lord and King. Go and tell your master I am here, and beg him to bring me down some clothes to wear. You need not fear my anger,” he added in a milder voice, “I will forget your insolence and not punish you for it—if you go at once.”

“Oh yes,” grinned the man, “you are the King, and I am dreaming. Well, take your turn at that and dream too, that is my counsel to you. This gate does not exist, it only *seems* to do so. Come through!”

His face vanished from the grating, and the King heard his steps retreating across the yard. At this a sudden fury seized upon the unhappy man. He hurled himself at the gate, kicking and beating, hammering it with his fists and howling in impotent anger.

Suddenly the gate flew open, and there stood the porter, bill in hand, and mighty furious.

"Are you so eager to enter, fool?" said he. "Come, then, willy-nilly you shall go before my lord, and I promise you before another hour is out you will be as anxious to get away. 'Come, on with you!' he cried, pushing the King with the butt-end of his weapon. "By St. Mary, but you go leisurely enough now! A minute ago you would have battered down the door!"

So it came about that as Hugh the Ranger was sitting over his wine, with many of his friends around him, a loud burst of laughter sounded from outside the door. A moment later a squire rushed in, trying to compose his face into some semblance of gravity and failing very much in the attempt.

"My lord," said he, "there is a man outside dressed as Adam was before the fall. He claims to be the King, and says that you will recognize him. He is not very much like the King, except, indeed, that he has a beard of the same shape. John the Porter has him outside now. Shall he enter? No doubt he is mad, but it may be that some treason lurks behind his actions."

"Well," said the Ranger lazily, "I am tired and little in the mood to be worried by crazy folk, but it may be wise to see him. Bring him in."

The squire went away, and in a few minutes returned with the porter and the naked man, upon whom all the company stared with some curiosity and more derision. The King, however, paid no heed to any of them. Now that he had attained the Ranger's presence he made sure his troubles were at an end, and without waiting to be addressed he began eagerly to speak.

"No doubt you wonder what is the reason for this strange appearance," said he. "It is true Kings have

not been dressed in this way since Noah's flood brought a cooler climate to the world. You shall know all in time; but first, Hugh, I pray you reach me down that cloak that lies on the board. Common folk, it seems, think a King is made by royal crown and silken robe and sword. You and I know better, is it not so? The signs of majesty lie in the man himself." He would no doubt have gone chattering on, but that something in the Ranger's eye gave him pause.

"What, man!" he cried. "You do not rise! You look strangely on me! What is this? Am I no longer King, and does someone reign in my stead? I see it all now. You have been secretly plotting against me. If that is so, I counsel you, make a good end of the business and slay me now, for as long as I am alive I have only to nod my head and armies will arise to take a terrible vengeance on those that affront me."

"This fellow is mad," said the Ranger. "God help him, he is raving! Give him a meal and a coat to cover his nakedness, and let him go."

At this, the King's pent-up fury burst forth. "Woe to this house and to thee, thou loathsome traitor!" he cried. "The time shall come when red flame shall burst through these carven windows, for as sure as I am King I will burn this place over your head!" He shook off the grasp of those who held him, and, still raving, ran from the hall and out of the gate; nor did he cease running until his strength gave out and he fell exhausted by the wayside.

There he lay, panting and confused, for how long he knew not, until the noise of horses' hoofs gave sign of a cavalcade approaching. Presently, for it was now night,

the glare of torches was seen, held by runners, who cleared the road for the litter of some mighty man. The torch-bearers were followed by soldiers, on whose coats the King recognized the badge of Duke Peter, one of his own lords, an envious, false, and miserly man, whom he had never loved. At sight of the litter the King started up, rage filling his heart anew. It was all clear to him now. There had been a plot to turn him from the throne. Even now the usurper was perhaps at the palace, and Duke Peter, ever shifty and self-seeking, was hastening to offer allegiance.

The King's voice rang out shrill above the clatter of the crowd. "Well met, Duke Peter!" he cried scornfully. "You are wise to waste no time ere you make friends with my enemies. A good journey to you, and may you meet no obstacles on the road that will surely lead you to ruin!"

One of the soldiers struck the King across the face with the flat of his sword, while others rushed to seize him. All was confusion. The litter stayed, and the guards clustered around it to protect the person of the Duke. A moment later the Duke pushed the curtains aside and signed to the men to bring the King nearer. There in the glare of the torches the two faced each other, the Duke smiling, the King's features working with impotent rage.

"What, man, you were cursing me?" asked the Duke. "You have a grievance, then? Either I or some of my men have done you wrong? You have chosen a bad time to speak. Come to-morrow, when I am in counsel at the judgment-seat, and I promise you justice shall be done."

“The night is dark,” answered the King; “you cannot see my face. Bid your men bring the torches nearer. So! Now do you know me? Can you not see I am the King?”

The Duke’s smile faded, and he gazed stonily at the man before him. “A pretty story, truly,” he said. “Plainly you are mad, but you are lucky to have met with me, and not with the King himself. He has a short way with fellows of your kidney, mad or not. Here, fool, take this, and buy yourself food and something to wear; and if you take my advice, you will keep away from the town, lest another attack such as this should have more fatal consequences. Press on, men,” he added sharply. “Time is short, and we shall be late.”

A few minutes later the entire cavalcade had passed on its way, leaving the King speechless in the middle of the road, holding a coin in his trembling hand. He looked at the silver piece. It bore his own image, crowned and sceptred, seated on a throne in his royal robes, with a quartered globe as his footstool.

II.

Scarcely knowing what he did, the King set out to follow the procession, the lights of which were already vanishing in the distance. For a long time he walked on, growing every minute more weary, until at last he cast himself down, and forgot in dreamless sleep his day of trouble.

When he awoke the sun had risen, and the birds were singing above him. For a few moments he could not remember where he was, but then, little by little, the knowledge of his hopeless position came back to him,

bringing with it a load of misery almost too great to be borne.

Looking round, the King perceived that he was near the gates of his own city, and, there and then, he determined to make one more attempt to win recognition. Trouble had made him wary, and he approached the gates with care, hiding now and then from people who passed him on the road. The gates of the city were not yet open, for it was early, and outside them were gathered a crowd of country-folk laden with their vegetables and grain, waiting for entrance to the market. As unostentatiously as possible he took a place among them, but they soon marked him out, and he became a butt for much vulgar wit and pleasantry. One stout peasant, however, who had brought a waggon full of fruit, took pity on him, and after giving him a drink of milk in a wooden bowl, asked him who he was, and how he came to be in such a sad plight.

Misery had made the King prudent. "Friend," said he, "I was set upon by robbers last night, and stripped of all I had. I am a rich merchant, well known at the palace. If you could take me there, I could get clothes and money from a squire I know, and I would richly reward you for your kindness."

The peasant was a kind-hearted fellow, and readily promised to do what was required. When the gates were opened the King mounted into the waggon, and, lying there, was brought at last to the gate of the palace. There he took leave of his simple friend, after inquiring his name and place of abode, so that he might reward him in time to come, and rushed quickly through the outer court.

Fortunately, no one was there on guard, but at the gate of the inner court a soldier stopped him, gazing with surprise at his bruised and bleeding body. The soldier made sure he had to deal with one possessed, and sternly bade him withdraw.

“Let me pass,” pleaded the King. “Good fellow, let me go on. I know you quite well. Do you not recognize me? I am Jovinian, your lord and master.”

“Here’s a fine thing,” grumbled the man. “Another task for John Hangman, if I misdoubt not. Truly many a tall fellow has danced upon air for less. This is a case for the sergeant.” And, there and then, he marched the unhappy King into the guard-room, where he was soon surrounded by gibing men-at-arms, who told him with great detail of the fate that was presently in store for him. Half an hour later came a message that the King desired to see this impudent impostor, who had had the temerity to bring his ridiculous claims to the very palace itself; and his hands having been bound behind his back, he was marched through the courtyard and up the staircase into the great hall of audience. There on the throne, crowned with the royal crown and clad in the royal robes, sat the usurper, ivory sceptre in hand. At his feet sat the Queen, and round him were grouped the kingdom’s nobles and lords.

Jovinian began to tremble in every limb. The man on the throne, to whom the others paid such unsuspecting reverence, was not a bit like him in the face, but there seemed a glory round his head, and from his eyes flashed a light of majesty and command.

“Well,” he said coldly, “thou art there. What hast thou to say?”

"This," cried Jovinian boldly. "I was King but yesterday, and though you sit in my place, and have the power to dash me to death upon the stones of this floor, not all you can do will alter that. Though I have not a friend left in the world, I am Jovinian still, and rightful King of this land."

"Poor fool!" said he who sat upon the throne. "*My* name is Jovinian. I was King here yesterday, and many a year before that. Thou hast earned death by thine insolence, but before I give thee over to the hangman thou shalt have the chance of proving to thy crazy mind that what I say is true. Here are my lords, who have served me many a year. Here is my faithful Queen. What say they? Am I King, or thou?"

"Long live Jovinian!" cried the lords, and the Queen knelt to kiss the gilt-shod feet of him who sat upon the throne. "Truly," said she, "thou art my liege lord, the husband whom I love!"

"Thou seest, wretch!" said he. "What hinders me now from giving thee over to death, for the traitor that thou art? Yet such mercy is in me, that if thou wilt kneel down humbly and crave pardon for thy sin, acknowledging thyself no King, but base-born, I will let thee go free!"

The unhappy King laughed bitterly, and a red flush mantled his cheek. "You lie," he cried. "I am Jovinian, born of great Kings. Slay me, if you will; death is better than shame!"

For a time the other made no answer, gazing on Jovinian with a stern and steadfast gaze; then gradually a smile lighted up his face. "Thou at least hast courage," he said, "and for that thou shalt not die. I give thee

life. Live on as a humble man, and forget these crazy dreams."

Jovinian gazed wildly round the hall, seeking in vain for one friendly face among the lords he knew so well. All stood unmoved—the Marshal, the Chamberlain, the grey-headed Captain of the Guard, at whose side he had often stood in time of war. Nay, more, as Jovinian made a step forward, and the guards seized him, his own favourite hound that was lying in its usual place at the foot of the throne leaped, snarling, at his throat, and but for the protection of the guard would have torn him limb from limb.

Then the soldiers led him from the palace, and, having taken him through the streets to the city gates, thrust him outside, charging him to be thankful for the King's mercy, and not to dare it by entering the city again.

With uncertain steps, bowed down and half mad, in truth, with the weight of his misery, the unhappy man wandered along the road, knowing little and caring nothing where he went. At midday he found himself near a clay-built hovel by a brook, and he remembered that here lived a pious hermit to whom he had often gone for counsel in days gone by. "Who knows," thought Jovinian, "perhaps he will remember me, and at any rate he will give me food and shelter."

A timid knock brought the hermit speedily to the door. The good man gazed pitifully at the wretched King, whom he thought a beggar, and asked him what evil chance had befallen him that left him in such a sorry plight.

"Do you not know me, Father?" asked the King. "Naked, bruised, and wretched as I am, can you not recognize Jovinian, your friend and lord?"

"Nay, you are mad," answered the hermit. "If you wish help from me you may have it readily enough, but not because of such tales as this. Come in, and pray God to forgive you for your presumption and sin."

Then, with a sob, the King fell to his knees, and for perhaps the first time in his life humbled himself and prayed whole-heartedly for pardon. "O Lord," he said, "weak and foolish as I am, Thou lovest me still. Have pity on my helplessness. I am grown weary of my folly. Aid me to live a nobler life. Count me as weak and yielding clay, ready to take impress from Thee."

The King rose from his knees, and in that moment his prayer was answered, for, turning, he saw the hermit staring at him in amazement, and knew that he was recognized at last. "O master!" cried the old man; "is it indeed you, and in this wretched plight, or is it only a dream that clouds my eyes?"

Then a feeling of great joy and thankfulness came into the King's heart, and he said: "Since you know me, surely God is good, and my sin is forgiven me. Get me some food and clothing, never mind how rough and poor it may be, and I will go back to my own city and brave the men of my Court again. But first, Father, I pray you, give me your blessing, and shrive me clean of all my pride and wickedness."

With tears in his eyes, the good old hermit ministered to the King's needs, both those of the body and the soul, and an hour or two later, clad in a rough serge gown and girdled with a belt of rope, Jovinian set out for the palace.

III.

It was still light when Jovinian came to the city gate. Two ancient warders stood there, and they stepped back respectfully as he passed, though without saluting.

“It is the King,” said one from behind his hand in a whisper to his mate. “He gave command that he would pass this way to-day in disguise, and ordered that no reverence should be paid to him.”

Smiling, the King passed on, and he almost forgot all the pain and misery he had suffered when he saw that the people in the streets recognized him at once, though in obedience to some command they had received not one of them spoke or incommoded his path.

At the palace gate he seemed to be expected, for a squire came out to meet him, and said softly: “The Queen awaits you, my lord, in the minstrel chamber, in accordance with your commands.”

“It is well,” answered the King. “Lead on, then.” And he felt now that all doubts were vanished, and that he had really come into his own again. Yet with a start he suddenly remembered the usurper, the man who had confronted him on the throne, and he could not help wondering what was the meaning of all the strange things that had happened.

In the hall of the minstrels the Queen was waiting for him, seated with her embroidery in her lap, though with idle hands, as one on whom a spell has been cast; and by her side, still splendid in royal robe, and signet ring, and crown, stood that other, the false King, with stern, set face.

Anger flashed up in Jovinian’s heart as he saw him, and he stepped forward with the light of indignation in

his eyes. But before he could utter a word, a wondrous change came over the man before him. A radiant light enshrouded his form; the royal robe faded, changed, became a robe of glimmering white; and from his shoulders sprang two shining wings, flashing with iridescent light that dazzled the eyes with very beauty.

The King stood awed, and in solemn tones the angel form spoke:

"Be not dismayed, O King," said he. "Many a time before have I been close to thee, though thou sawest me not. Thou hast learnt that the great God, who made thee rich and powerful and a King, can, in the space of a day, without altering thy form or face, make thee an outcast, a wretch whom even the poorest spurn, and remove the remembrance of thy power and glory from the minds of all.

"Thou hast learned thy lesson. Thank the great God that He loved thee well enough to give it thee, and that time is allowed thee before the sure day comes when thou shalt stand before Him face to face to repent of thy folly and pride. Be a King again! I go, and thou shalt see me no more until, for thee, this world is gone, and thou standest on the unknown shore, no King, but a man, among the humblest of thy subjects."

He ceased, and in a moment the light that shone around him dimmed and faded. A sudden gleam lighted the door of the hall, and then that, too, vanished, and the King saw that the angel form had gone.

For a time he stood there, wondering; then suddenly the Queen, who all this while had remained still and silent, stirred, and stretched her arms as one awaking from sleep.

“Fair lord,” said she, “the hour grows late, and already the banqueting chamber must be filled with the guests you have bidden to the feast. Is it your will that we go down to them?”

And so, still wondering, but saying nothing, the King gave his assent, and after having arrayed himself in his richest robes, went down to meet his nobles assembled; and they paid him reverence in their usual manner, and not one of them all seemed to be aware that anything strange had come to pass, or spoke of the crazy beggarman who only the day before had proffered his insolent claim.

To Jovinian, seated at the feast, the events of the past twenty-four hours seemed like the memory of a troubled dream, but as day after day passed by, the thought of them came back again clear and clearer to his mind. And after many years, when he was very near his end, the King made up his mind that this tale of the humbling of his foolish pride should be told, so that, perchance, his successors on the throne should learn from it how weak is even the power of Kings, and how easily overthrown, when they forget from whom they hold their kingly office.

And, thinking thus, he called a scribe, and bade him write out the tale in full, and ordered that the record should be preserved among the archives of the kingdom.

So it was done, and the tale was set down in letters of gold on fair parchment for his heirs to read.

THE LOVE OF ALCESTIS

I.

IN olden times there lived a King in Thessaly whose name was Admetus, and he was young and strong and comely to look upon, and beloved by all his people. One autumn evening Admetus sat in the porch of his palace, dreamily watching the setting sun, when he saw a stranger plodding along the dusty road that led to the palace gates. It was a young man, clad in skins, and bearing a staff and scrip. He looked neither to the right nor left, and as he came nearer the King saw that, stained and dusty with travel as he was, the stranger was beautiful as a young god, upright and clean-limbed, with clear-cut, noble features.

Approaching the King's chair, the stranger knelt down, and, stretching out his hand, said: "O King, give shelter to a banished man. Out of your abundance help one who is poor, and perhaps in return I may be able one day to give you gifts more valuable than any in your treasure-house."

The King smiled. "I need neither gifts nor promises," said he. "Rise up, and be my guest for this night at least. To-morrow we will see what you can do; but in the meantime you shall remain unquestioned, even though you may have spilt the blood of a King."

The stranger rose to his feet. "I take your boon, O King," said he, "for indeed I do not wish to tell why I am fugitive from my own people. A nameless man am I, and nameless the deed that sent me forth. But helpless am I not. Hear now, rather than to-morrow, the things I can do well, and let me put my hands between yours and take the oath to be your man for many a year.

"Make me your shepherd, King. There is no beast in all the woods of Ossa shall harm the tenderest yearling of your flocks. Come to me when you are overburdened with sorrow or care; I can make music that will charm you to forgetfulness. Count me your man should war fall upon this land, and let your servants standing by bear witness against me if I fail you in that hour."

"I take you at your word," answered the King. "Give me your right hand, and swear to be true man to me. You can serve me well doing much less than thou hast said." And, calling his servants, Admetus bade them lead the stranger to the guest chamber and bathe his wearied feet, and give him food and drink, and a change of raiment. And this they did very willingly, for they were glad to serve so fair and noble a young man.

And, left to himself, the King mused, and, smiling, thought: "If this wanderer was born in any dwelling less humble than a palace I am no King, but the meanest man in Thessaly."

II.

So for some months the stranger dwelt in the kingdom of Admetus, and whatever he set his hand to that he did right well. Soon he became the chief of all the King's

herdsmen, and this without forfeiting the love and honour of his fellows. No man in all the land was so skilful as he with the bow, and the wolves that came to prey upon the flocks learned before long to leave his folds alone. He had wonderful skill, too, in playing the harp, and the fame of his music spread far and wide throughout the land. Everybody loved him, from the youngest shepherd lad to King Admetus himself, and this in spite of the fact that no one ever learned who he was or whence he came. There was one strange thing about the shepherd that made even the King a little troubled, and that was this: on every feast day, when the people went to make sacrifice to the gods, the stranger was never among them; by some device or other he would always manage to be away.

So the time passed until the coming of spring, when King Admetus made a journey to the land of Iolcos; for there Pelias made a great feast, and Kings and Princes came from far and near to take part in the games of endurance and skill.

At the end of six days Admetus returned, wearing a scarlet cloak over his shoulders, a gold crown upon his head, and a splendid sword at his side. Behind him paced four beautiful white horses, and all these were prizes that he had won during the games. The people cheered him as he passed, but no answering smile lit up the King's face. His eyes were downcast, and his appearance was moody and troubled.

The next morning he rose early, and went forth into the fields where already his herdsman tended the sheep. From afar off the King heard the sweet sad notes of the shepherd's lyre, and stood awhile listening to the words of the song he sang. Then he approached, and the

shepherd, seeing his worn and haggard face, stopped suddenly and threw aside his harp.

“Why, master, what is this?” asked he. “You have returned with honour from the games, and yet you wear the look of one crushed with misery. Is there some secret trouble, and can I help you?”

“You help me!” said Admetus bitterly. “Aye, as the spring showers can help the field that has not been sown. Yet listen to my tale.

“At Iolcos, on the first day of the games, I took my way to the palace of the King, where all the guests were gathered at his command. There he sat on his throne, and by the side of him stood his daughter. O shepherd, how can I tell of her beauty! Faith shone from the sweet eyes of her, and her soft voice when she spoke sounded to my ears like music.

“At the games that day no man could stand against me, for the knowledge that the Princess was looking on nerved my arm and brain. Princes and Kings, great lords from Thessaly, Thebes, and Attica matched their prowess against mine in the lists, but I conquered them all, and at last I came to the King again to take the prizes I had won.

“And as I stood before him a madness seized upon me, and made me bold to claim the richest gift it was in his power to give, his daughter as my wife. And like a fool, elated with glory, I must needs stand forth and ask if there were yet some great task I must do to win the maid.

“Then King Pelias smiled at me and made reply. ‘Nothing would please me better than such a marriage. But we of this royal house have great burdens to bear. Nor is this maiden, my daughter, without them; for the

day she becomes a wife will be her death-day unless she wed with one who will come and take her in a chariot drawn, not by oxen, but by lions and boars. Have you such a chariot, O Lord of Phææ? for if not, you had best turn your eyes elsewhere for a bride.'

"What could I say, herdsman? I tell you I was mad—crazed with love and dizzy with my triumphs. I swore I would come, even in such a chariot, to bear the maid away, and in earnest of my words I tore my father's ring from off my finger and gave it into the King's keeping, telling him that, by that token, should I fail, he could take my kingdom from me, and henceforward I would be a wanderer on the face of the earth. So I left him and turned homeward with my prizes, and I had not gone far before I awoke fully to my boastful folly and my shame. With a word I had thrown away both my inheritance and my hope of love, for I had promised something that no mortal man can do."

The herdsman's face grew bright and eager as he listened to the King's tale. "Take comfort, master," said he. "It may be that I can help you. Give me ten days, for I must go on a journey, and while I am away get another herdsman and hope for the best."

So saying, he caught up his spear and bow, and without another word set off northward, while the King watched him with wondering eyes.

On the tenth night afterwards, as the King lay tossing in uneasy slumber, he was awakened by the voice of his herdsman, who stood by the bedside, bearing in his hand a long white staff carved with strange figures.

"Awake, Admetus!" cried he, "and hasten to Iolcos. Even now the ivory chariot waits at the gates, and the

lion and the boar are yoked together in the traces. Take this staff, for by the power of it you can bend the fierce beasts to your will. But heed well what I say. Having come to Iolcos, you must not linger there. Bid them bring forth the maid at once, and pile her wedding gifts within the car. This done, turn round again and return to Pheræ; but when you come to the stream that flows through the wood where men make sacrifice to Diana, stay there, and wait for me."

Admetus would have spoken, but there was something in his servant's face that bade him keep silence, so without a word he arose, and dressed himself, and took the staff, and went to the palace gate. There, sure enough, the chariot with its strange team stood waiting, the mingled roaring and whining of the yoked beasts filling all the air. Leaping up, the King took the leathern reins in hand, and at the sight of his staff the animals fell silent, and set off swiftly along the road.

Truly never was such a strange carriage seen before. At dawn peasants going to their work in the fields stood and gaped at the car in blank surprise, rubbing their eyes to make sure they were awake. At the gates of Iolcos the guards fled in terror, and the townsmen in the streets rushed hither and thither in their fright. By the time Admetus reined up his beasts before the palace porch the news of his coming had spread far and wide, and he found there, lined up to meet him, the priests with their censers all looking very scared and troubled. Presently men from the palace brought out the Princess's dowry, precious things in gold and silver and ivory, and rich clothes from the Syrian shores, dyed with purple and scarlet. Then, through the brazen doors,

appeared King Pelias himself, and Admetus cried out to him:

"Hail, King! I have fulfilled the task you set. Now bring forth your daughter, and give me back my father's ring."

"Fear not," answered Pelias. "I will keep my word. But will you not descend awhile and stay with me until the morning, that we may feast and talk together."

"Not so," said Admetus. "I must return on the very hour." And to himself he added: "If, as it seems, you think me a god, I should be but a fool to stay here until that dream is ended!"

Then Pelias bade his slaves pile the wedding gifts within the car, and presently to the sound of flutes softly playing the Princess Alcestis came forth in white raiment with her hair garlanded as a bride's.

And King Pelias took her hand and placed it in that of Admetus, and bade her take him to be her husband and her lord. Then the King, her father, gave to her the ring that was in his keeping, and bade her set it on Admetus's finger; and she did so, and they went forth together.

So the chariot went back again towards the town of Pheræ, but when the beasts that drew it came to the place of sacrifice in Diana's wood they stopped unchecked. From the shadow of the trees stepped the herdsman, who was waiting for them, and King Admetus gave the carved rod into his hand. The King tried to thank his servant for all he had done, but no words came to him; and the shepherd smiled and said: "You were kind to me in my hour of need, and now I have repaid a part of the debt I owe. But the time may come when you shall ask even a greater boon, and not in vain."

Then Admetus took his bride by the hand and led her towards the palace, and as they went they heard, fainter and fainter behind them, the roaring of the beasts that had drawn the chariot. As they approached the big brazen gates a troop of maidens, bearing flowers in their hands, came to bid them welcome. And so Alcestis passed into the King's house and became his wife.

III.

Some months passed by, and Admetus and his Queen lived together very happily. Summer waned to autumn, until at last came round the very day on which a year before the stranger had come to King Admetus's home. The King stood in the porch of his palace, feathering an arrow, when the herdsman approached and said: "King, the time has come for us to part. Come out with me to a place where we can be alone, for I have something to say to you that no man must overhear."

A little troubled in his mind, the King arose and followed the herdsman to a hill outside the town. Not a word was spoken by either as they climbed the hillside. The sun was now low in the sky, and although the valley they had left was shadowy grey, the crest of the hill was flooded with a golden light. Panting with the toil of the ascent, Admetus turned to look at his companion, and started back amazed, for the glory of the sunshine seemed to enfold him like a garment, and he stood out transfigured, godlike, in the glow.

Seeing something of the fear and wonder that were expressed in the King's eyes, the herdsman spoke. "Listen, O mortal," he said. "For the first time thou seest

me somewhat as I am, yet fear not, for as much as it is possible for the gods to feel the loves of men, such love I bear for thee. I am of the immortal seed of Jove. No man can know by name and live, but on the earth the people call me Phœbus, and Latona's son.

"For a year I have served thee well, but now the term of my service is ended, and I must leave thee. Yet before I go there is something I would say. Thou art happy now, O King, but times change, and I can foresee a day when trouble will fall upon thee. Do not strive to avert that hour, or to struggle with Fate, for the will of the gods cannot be altered by the puny wills of men. Live thy life; until that day come be merry; but when the hour of death seems very close to thee, and a beckoning finger calls thee forth into the cold and dark, then think of me. Take these arrows; cherish them as the greatest of all thy treasures, and, in the hour of thy need, cast them with incense on a fire. So shall I hear thy call, and come to serve thee even once again."

The shepherd ceased, and Admetus hung silent, gazing on him. The sun dipped below the farthest hills, and one long shaft of light illumined the figure of the god. It faded, and a grey mist rose from the ground. The herdsman's form merged into it, became faint and dim amid the eddying wreaths, and at last vanished altogether. Then from the west a chill wind arose, and blew the mist away; and King Admetus saw that he was alone. But on the ground at his feet lay a brazen quiver, full of arrows. He picked it up, and, deep in thought, made his way slowly back to the palace.

For many years after that King Admetus and Alcestis, his wife, lived in calm happiness and peace. Under their



“ HE STOOD OUT TRANSFIGURED, GOD-LIKE, IN THE GLOW.”



rule the land grew rich and prosperous, and their people loved and blessed them. No desolating war spread its ravages over that land; no foolish ambition or desire for fame filled the King's heart. Better to him was the sight of cornfields rich with yellow grain than all the pomp and glory of war. Above the spoils of battle he loved the spoils won by honest labour from the hand of Nature—the clustering harvest of the vine and the garnered sheaves. Far more than the martial sound of the trumpet he delighted to hear the lowing of the sleek cattle in his fields, and the contented voices of happy men and women. Something of godlike grace and wisdom seemed to have passed into the King during the year that the god had lived with him, and people from afar, seeing the prosperous state of his kingdom, cried that the Golden Age had come.

So the King and Queen passed down the years, and the deep love which Alcestis bore her husband never faltered. He, too, loved her dearly, and found her as beautiful as on the day he had borne her from her father's home.

But at last there came a day when Admetus lay sick upon his bed, and the physicians said that he must die. Close by the bedside stood Alcestis weeping, and all the lords of the land were assembled in the room to pay their last homage to their lord.

Then Admetus signed to his wife to bend down to him, and whispered to her to put all the folk out of the chamber; and he bade her go to his treasury and bring forth the brazen quiver she would find there, and return quickly.

Wondering, the Queen obeyed, and brought the arrows

and laid them by his side. Then, in a feeble voice, the King said: "O love of mine, a shadow falls between us, and I feel that I am failing fast. Yet not even now is all hope dead, and it may be that I shall not die, but live, if only you will carry out my commands. Stir up the brands upon the hearth, and cast incense thereon, and then take these arrows and lay them in the flames, and wait whatever may befall."

So Alcestis took the arrows, and did as the King commanded. The incense burnt blue as it fell on the smouldering embers, and clouds of sweet-scented smoke floated into the air. Admetus's lips moved in a prayer, but no words were heard, and in a minute or two it seemed that he slept; then, trembling, she lay down, and soon merciful sleep fell upon her also, and for a time soothed her sorrows.

Suddenly Alcestis awoke with a start. The door of the chamber was flung open, and a loud voice cried the name of the King. There, on the threshold, clad still in his humble shepherd's garb, stood the herdsman. In his hand he bore his long spear, and bow of cornel-wood, and his horn was slung from his shoulder.

As the Queen watched with widely staring eyes, the herdsman advanced into the middle of the room. "I have kept my word, O Admetus," he cried. "I have come to thee in thy need, but the tidings I have brought are not good tidings for thee. The gods grant thee life, but on this condition—that some faithful soul shall be found who loves thee well enough to die in thy stead. Three days are granted thee, and if in that time no friend can be found to make the sacrifice, no power can avert thy doom."

So the herdsman cried, and the next moment was gone; and Admetus, who had wakened at the first sound of the well-known voice, turned his face to the wall. Hope was dead within him, but there was no fear in his heart. "My people love me," he thought, "and they will mourn for many days over my tomb; but where is there among them one who loves me well enough to give his life for mine?" So, smiling a little at the thought of crying this tale in the streets of the town, he closed his eyes again, and fell into a peaceful sleep.

But in the mind of Alcestis, standing by the bed, wild thoughts were thronging. Her eyes were dry of tears, but her heart was full of anguish and love for her husband, who was so soon to die. She thought of the happy days that they had spent together, of his gentleness and loving-kindness, and she cried out against the bitterness of the fate that was to tear them asunder. "How can I live without him?" she thought. "How can I bear to think of his face that I shall never see again, to go through life alone till the darkness falls upon me also?"

And suddenly she knew the thing that she must do, and calmness fell upon her and she made ready. "Take my life for his," she whispered, and it seemed to her that out of the silent dark the answer came.

Then she laid herself down on the bed by the side of her husband, and kissed his wasted hand. Soon she lay quiet, and a deep silence fell upon the chamber, broken only by the wailing of the wind outside. The night wore away, and the grey light of dawn shone through the windows. The eastern sky grew brighter and brighter, all opal-tinged, and flushed with crimson and pearl. A

shaft of sunshine fell upon the wall, and travelled slowly down the hangings of the bed, until it shone upon the faces of the two that lay there.

And beneath that golden glow the face of the King showed fresh and ruddy as that of a young man, but the face of Alcestis, the Queen, was set and marble-white.

THE STORY OF RHODOPE

I.

ON the shores of Greece, on a strip of plain between high, snow-capped mountains and the sea, there dwelt in days of old a simple, kindly folk, whose name does not concern my tale. Though living at the very edge of the sea, these people were chiefly tillers of the soil. A few men among them sailed out once or twice a year to catch the golden mullet or tunny-fish, but most were busy cultivating their fields and vineyards, and as the land was very fertile, their labour was abundantly rewarded. Now and again a low, black galley from one of the trading cities far away would put into the little harbour, and at such times both the men and the women would flock to talk to the sailors, to admire the dyed stuffs and metal ornaments they brought, and to exchange their corn, oil, and wine for such glittering treasures. No sooner was the ship departed, however, than all went contentedly back to their work, and such as possessed jewels or fine clothes put them away in their chests until the coming of the next holiday.

In this land there were no very rich people, and but few who could be called poor. There was one man, however, who for some reason or other was always a little poorer than his neighbours. Why this should be nobody

knew. True, he was now approaching his sixtieth year, but he was still hale and strong, and well skilled in field lore; but ill-fortune seemed always to pursue him. Did he make up his mind in a spell of fine weather to cut his hay, no sooner had he done so than the rains came and spoiled the whole crop. If this did not happen, something else equally unfortunate did. Splendid harvesting weather came in the year when his wheat grew thinnest, or he misjudged the time for making his wine. If wolves ravaged the village, it was always his sheep that suffered. His horses went lame apparently for no reason at all, and disease broke out among his cattle. In short, nothing ever seemed to prosper with him, and in spite of hard work and thrift he grew poorer and poorer every year.

In spite of all his misfortunes, however, this man kept up a stout heart, and there was only one thing that made him discontented with his lot—he had no child to comfort him in his old age. Often and often he had prayed to the gods to take pity on his loneliness, and he thought that if only a child could be born to him he would be perfectly happy.

One hot afternoon, tired out with a hard morning's work, the man fell asleep, and dreamed a strange dream. He thought that he stood hand in hand with his wife, and that both of them were looking intently at a little blossom that grew at their feet. As they watched, the little plant sprang up rapidly until it was a slender sapling as tall as themselves. A bright light surrounded it, so brilliant that their eyes could not bear to look upon it, and they sank down dizzy to the ground. Then for a space blankness fell upon them, and it was as though they had died; yet, without looking, they knew that the sapling above

them had grown to a tall tree, and it seemed that from the branches of it hung a crown of gold, a sword, a ship, and a temple. Then, as they lay there, a mighty wind arose, and swayed the leaves of the tree, and the branches crashed together with the sound of trumpet-blasts and the clang of armour, and through the din came the voices of men singing wild songs in an outlandish tongue.

The good man awoke, wondering much what this strange dream could mean. He felt somehow that it was a prophecy of good, and he felt curiously happy as he arose and went about his work. When he returned that night to his homestead, he learned that during the day his wife had given birth to a daughter.

Who now was happier than this happy man? Poor though he was, he gave a feast to all his neighbours to celebrate the child's birth, and spared neither meat nor wine. "What does it matter?" thought he. "My luck has changed now, and the next year will turn the scale of my fortunes."

The next year, however, was little more prosperous than the year before, and as time passed by, and his little daughter grew from a baby into a beautiful girl, he still remained a poor man, unfortunate in almost every enterprise he undertook.

So things went on until the girl, whose name was Rhodope, grew to be nineteen years old. She was now so beautiful that her like had never been seen in that land, and many young men fell in love with her. To all of them she remained cold, and paid little heed to their sighing. Many a young man thought his heart broken for her sake, but it was no fault of hers, for she gave none of them any encouragement. She kept herself to herself,

diligent in her mother's house, and by her proud, serene bearing she seemed a being set apart from the little world around her.

One summer night Rhodope sat with her father and mother in the bare hall of their home. The dusk had fallen, and the bats' wings brushed against the window; but they did not light the candle, but sat in the gloom talking. The old man was telling a tale of his adventurous youth—a tale of sea-rovers who attacked the galley on which he was sailing, and of the fierce fight that ensued. He told of the painted dragon at the pirate ship's prow, and the steel beak that rammed the enemy and sent her swift to doom. "But we took her at last," the old man said, "though for three hours our fate hung in the balance, and we had to fight like grim death. We beached her in a sandy bay, and the same night fell to ransacking her hold. There were some fine treasures, I can tell you—armour, and rich stuffs, and gold and silver ornaments. We drew lots to divide the spoil. In those days my ill-luck had not begun to fall on me, and I did very well. What did I get? Two casks of wine, and such a jar of honey as would be fit for the gods. That's gone long ago. What else? A robe of purple silk all sewn with gold—I am sorry, for your sake, Rhodope, I parted with that; it would have become your beauty well—a crested helm wrought with gold that must have belonged to some Prince, and that bow and sheath of arrows that hangs upon the wall. There was yet another thing—the only one of the treasures that still remains to me. Light the candle, and we will show Rhodope a marvel!"

Smiling at Rhodope's eager gaze, the good wife arose

and lighted the candle, while her husband unlocked a great chest that stood in a corner of the room and rummaged among its treasures. It was full of household linen and suchlike gear, but from the very bottom he drew at last a bundle wrapped up in a red cloth of embroidered silk. This he laid carefully on the table, and, too slowly for Rhodope's patience, began to unfold.

At last he stepped back, and there, shining in the candle-light, lay a pair of golden shoes, inlaid with precious gems that flashed out brilliant rays of all the colours of the rainbow. Rhodope had never seen such a gorgeous treasure. Shoes such as those must surely have been fashioned for a Queen. Blushing faintly, she stretched out her hand to touch them, and then, as if realizing that such beautiful things were not for her, sighed and turned away.

Her father looked at her with a rueful smile. "When I won these," he said, "I had wealth enough, but neither chick nor child to share it with me. Now that I have a daughter whose beauty such baubles would grace, I am so poor that it would be foolish to keep them. Everything else that I had of value has gone, and, indeed, I have only kept these all this time because there was no man in this land who could pay me the worth of them. But I am hard pressed, and now these must go, too; yet I would gladly keep them still, for a wise man to whom I showed them once advised me to guard them well, because, he said, they would bring me good-fortune. If that is so, the luck is late in coming, and, meanwhile, we are near to lacking bread. The high-priest has often begged me to sell him the shoes. He might give, perhaps, a yoke of oxen for them. You shall take them to

him to-morrow, Rhodope, and make as good a bargain as you can."

A light flush mounted to Rhodope's cheek as she listened, and her mother, seeing it, and interpreting it aright, said: "Ah, you are ashamed, daughter—ashamed that we have fallen so low. It need not have been so. You might have had the high-priest's son for a husband had you not been so proud."

Rhodope did not answer, and her face set like a stone. But her father came to the rescue. "Nay, mother," said he, "do not chide the maid. She is not one to wed where she can give no love, and, after all, we would not have her otherwise."

II.

The next morning Rhodope arose betimes and took the road that led to the temple of Jove, where the high-priest dwelt. For the first part of the way this road ran between sunny meadows and past many a prosperous homestead and vineyard rich with its load of ripening grapes. Most of the people at work in the fields or standing by their house-doors knew Rhodope, and gave her a cheery greeting as she went by, and she answered them all with a quiet dignity that some mistook for pride. The dark-eyed shepherd, whistling gaily as he strode along the road, cast down his eyes before Rhodope's almost unseeing glance, and felt himself coarse and unworthy. And at least one woman standing at her cottage-door, and irritated by Rhodope's stately manner, muttered after her: "Ah, my lady, if you were set as high in the world as you are low to-day, you would soon have your foot on the necks of the likes of us."

But Rhodope went on unheeding, intent upon her own thoughts. Presently she left the valley, and began to climb the hillside. Half-way up a wood of pine-trees clothed the slopes, and a light, fitful wind sang among the branches, making a sad music that fitted well to her serious thoughts; for Rhodope, poor maid! was thinking that life was hard and scarcely worth the living, and that happiness was but a dream. The road was steeper now, the way was hard-going, and Rhodope panted a little when she came to the top of the uplands and entered the rocky pass that led to the temple groves.

A short way along the pass she met the high-priest's son, a handsome, dark-eyed lad, leading a dappled hound. He stopped to talk to her, and told her that his father was not at home. "He is down at the shore," said the lad, "watching the tunnies. You will meet him returning if you go on along the pass. But, indeed, you had better wait for him in the house. I will go back with you, for I have had poor sport enough, and I am tired of hunting. To-night I will walk home with you if you fear the dark."

He spoke eagerly, watching her anxiously, for he loved this proud maid, and still hoped to win her. But Rhodope shook her head coldly, and bidding him farewell, went on her way without a glance behind. Soon the pass widened, and, having reached the summit of the hill, she had a clear view of the country below. Some three miles away, set in a narrow, grassy valley, she could see the temple of Jove, a fair, white building set around with houses and orchards. So clear was the summer air that she could even see the pigeons circling over the roofs, and plainly to her ears came the cawing of the rooks in the high elms

that bordered the cornfields. Nearer still, almost at Rhodope's feet, a wood filled a hollow valley, and the sun glinted on the waters of a lake fed by a little stream.

After resting a while to recover her breath, Rhodope again went on her way. It was now high noon, and very hot. By the time she reached the shelter of the woods the girl was tired out, and was glad to fling herself down on the grass. From her wallet she took the packet of coarse food she had brought with her, and ate daintily. Then, stepping across the daisy-studded grass to the lakeside, she bent down and drank of the clear, cool water.

It was so pleasant there, in the shade of the trees, that Rhodope was loth to go away. For a long time she lay staring dreamily at the green canopy of leaves overhead and the flecks of blue sky that shone between. After a while she began to think how nice it would be to bathe in the lake, and before long she had slipped off her clothes. First, however, she untied the bundle she carried, and amused herself by trying the dainty golden shoes on her bare white feet. They fitted as though they had been made for her, and she sighed as she set them down on the grass.

In another minute she was splashing in the cool water, swimming to and fro, now on her breast, now on her back or side; for like all men and maids of that country Rhodope was quite at home in the water. As she played she suddenly heard the scream of an eagle, and, turning, she saw the great bird swoop down from a crag on the hillside. Down, down he came, until she could hear the whirring of his wings, and then she gave a startled cry, for her eyes caught the gleam of the sun on the golden shoes, and she knew that the same sight



“RHODOPE SAW THAT HE HELD IN HIS TALONS ONE OF THE GOLDEN SHOES.”



had brought the eagle down. True enough! In another moment the bird dropped like a stone, flapped his wings, and rose again, and Rhodope saw that he held in his talons one of the golden shoes. One other raucous cry the eagle gave, then, sweeping round in a wide circle, soared again, until a jutting crag of the hill hid him from sight.

No doubt Rhodope ought to have been very much cast down at this mishap, but, strange to say, she was not. No sooner had the first shock passed, and, clothed again, she had wrapped up the remaining shoe in its red silk covering, than she began to find consolation. "Who knows," thought she, "this strange happening may be an omen of wonderful things that shall come to pass." And all the way home she was busy weaving romantic fancies and recalling all the tales she had heard of humbly born maids who had won the hearts of Princes and risen to wealth and power.

Once at home, however, she had to face her mother's wrath, and even her father, although he did not chide, looked reproachfully at her. When at last her mother's bitter railing changed to tears, the old man came to Rhodope, and taking her by the hand, bade her take comfort. "Happiness yet awaits you, my child," said he. "I am sure of that. And even if further troubles fall upon me, it will not be for long. There is a place where the sorrows of this world cannot enter, and I am going towards it fast." His sunken eyes looked with a world of love upon his daughter, and though his lips were trembling he tried to smile. Rhodope felt her own eyes grow dim with tears as she gazed at him, and in a moment the old man released her hand and returned to his work.

Soon afterwards he began to talk in a more cheery strain, discussing their means and prospects, and before long he had beguiled his wife's woebegone face into the semblance of a smile.

III.

The following months were far from happy ones either for Rhodope or her parents. Their poverty grew more pressing from day to day, and with every increasing worry the temper of Rhodope's mother grew gradually worse. From morn till night she never ceased from reproaching both her husband and her daughter with bitter tongue. "Why did I ever marry such a man?" she moaned. "From the day we were wed he has brought me nothing but misfortune and misery. As for you," she cried, turning to her daughter, "your wicked pride has been the cause of all—a wilful, stubborn daughter you have been to me, since first your eyes rested on those accursed shoes. As for the one that is left, if your father had his wits about him he would take the wretched thing and prise the gems out of it and sell them to get us bread."

Rhodope's father glanced uneasily at his daughter during this tirade, but the girl herself remained apparently unmoved, sitting with set face quietly at her loom. But later, when, half blind with rage, his wife had flung out of the room, he spoke to Rhodope.

"There is some truth in your mother's words," said he. "We are in a terrible plight, and those gems would be the saving of us. Yet for some reason I do not like to part with them. What do you think, daughter? You know I had a strange dream on the day you were

born, and I cannot help feeling that in some way these shoes are mixed up with your future fate."

Rhodope's face flamed red as she looked at him. "I have heard something about it," she said slowly, "but so long ago that my memories are vague."

The old man smiled at her. "Well, well," said he, "there is no need to repeat the tale. You shall keep the shoe—it may bring us good luck yet. In the meantime we will dream of happier days to come."

A year passed by. It was again the month of June, and on the very day that Rhodope had set out to visit the high-priest she made ready to go to the town to make some little purchases of household goods. She had already reached the house-door, when, moved by some impulse which she did not attempt to explain, she turned back, and, making her way to her chamber, knelt down before the big chest. From its dark recesses she drew out the shoe, still wrapped in the red silk covering as it had remained for a year, and for a time stood gazing dreamily at it; then she put it into the bosom of her gown and went on her way.

The highroad was crowded with folk, all hurrying in the direction of the town, as if some great excitement were toward. From fragments of their talk which reached her ears Rhodope gathered that some strange visitors had landed from a huge galley—big men, gloriously arrayed, with strange speech and ways. The news of their coming had already spread near and far, and everybody was hurrying into the town to gaze upon the strangers.

Following the crowd, Rhodope, too, entered the town and came to the market-place. A great crowd was there, surging round the altar that stood in the middle of the

square, and through the mass of people Rhodope thought she saw the flash and glitter of arms. She passed on, however, to do her marketing, and when she had at last made her purchases she returned to the market-place and hovered curiously on the outskirts of the crowd.

Suddenly, as she stood there, an overwhelming desire came upon her to see what was happening round the altar. She began to push her way through the people, and they, seeing her beauty, stood aside and made way for her.

On the steps of the altar a goodly company was assembled. There, sure enough, stood the strangers of whom the folk had whispered, some clad in silks of brilliant colours, others with helms and breastplates of gold. There, too, stood the grey-bearded city fathers, and the high-priest of the temple of Jove, garbed in his richest robes. A sharp knife gleamed in his hand, the sacrifice, a heifer garlanded with roses, stood before him, and even as Rhodope watched, the knife fell, and the heifer sank to the ground.

But there was one thing that claimed the girl's attention more than anything else. An iron tripod stood by the side of the altar, and on it—wonder of wonders!—was that very golden shoe Rhodope had lost a year ago, the fellow of the one she bore in her bosom.

At the sight of it she stood forward, tense, and almost without knowing what she did, advanced slowly towards the altar. A great silence fell upon all the people, and the richly clad strangers on the altar steps regarded her with awe and wonder. Beautiful as she was at all times, Rhodope's face and form shone with an almost unearthly beauty now. Clad in her simple habit of dark grey homespun, with her homely purchases still at her back, she

stood there like a Queen, her head upheld, her eyes shining with a strange light.

She mounted the altar steps, and then in a calm, clear voice that was plainly heard at the very outskirts of the crowd she spoke.

“Perchance you seek a match for that fair thing you seem to prize so much,” said she. “It lies here. Both of them were on my feet on this very day a year ago. They were my father’s, almost his only treasures, and the old man took great joy in them.”

So saying, Rhodope took from her bosom the golden shoe, and laid it side by side with the other on the tripod. A great burst of shouting went up from the crowd, and for the first time Rhodope felt the colour rise in her cheek, and a wave of timidity sweep over her.

When the tumult had a little subsided, one of the strangers, a grey-bearded old man splendidly attired, came forward.

“Now, praise be to the gods,” cried he, “that have given to these old eyes of mine the chance to see so fair a sight, and higher praises still that the King, my master, has found so fair and sweet a bride!”

The colour ebbed from Rhodope’s cheeks, and she stood pale and trembling. What could these strange words mean? But, seeing her distress, the old man spoke again.

“Have no fear, O maid,” said he. “The gods who made you beautiful designed you for a glorious destiny, and have kept you here apart until the appointed time. Now, they have led us to your land, so that their will may be fulfilled.

“A year ago the King, our master, held solemn sacri-

fire at the altar in our own country. The offering was laid, the fire was lighted, and the flame leapt up, paling in the bright sun. But even as the flame leapt there came a sudden cry from the blue sky above, and a bright thing fell flashing to the altar. Some of our people, staring skyward, said afterwards they had seen an eagle like a tiny speck soaring far above. How this may be I do not know, but the King, after a moment's silence, stretched out his hand and drew from the flame the thing that had so wonderfully descended. It was this shoe. For a long time he stood gazing upon it, and then, without another word, turned and left the place.

"From that time forward, day by day, our King grew more moody and pale. He spoke little, and grew strange-eyed and wild. Then at last he bade us take the shoe, and search the world over until we found her whose foot had touched it. 'For,' said he, 'whoever she may be, and whatsoever her name and station, I am assured that she is meant to be my wife, and I will not rest until she is found.'

"So, marvelling much, and thinking that some spirit troubled him, we set out upon our quest, and many were the lands we visited, and many the stormy seas we crossed. We met with good fortune and bad, and trod rough ways and dealt with many a lie; but at last the gods brought us here, and our quest is ended. Nought remains now, maiden, but for you to sail with us in our good ship to where the King waits."

Then, taking Rhodope by the hand, the old man led her to an ivory chair, and as soon as she was seated the others came up one by one and made obeisance to her, bending down to kiss the hem of her garment, while

again a great noise of shouting rose from the assembled crowd.

Then the old man asked Rhodope whether it was her will to go with them, and, if so, when; and she made answer in a low voice: "It were best to go to-day. But first let me go home to my father and mother, and tell them what has befallen. I would not have them hear the news from any other lips than mine."

So they let her go, and, passing through the awed and now silent crowd, Rhodope made her way back again to her father's house. She was still dazed and confused by the suddenness of the thing, but as she walked on her mind grew clearer, and she felt a great pride and joy in her glorious destiny.

The old man was busy with the cattle when she approached. She saw him afar off, walking among them with halting step, for he was growing very feeble. Eager to tell her news, Rhodope cried out to him: "O father, see, a Queen is coming towards you! Will you not turn and look?"

The old man came and stood gazing at her, wondering, for, indeed, her eyes shone like stars, and she had taken on a new and more gracious beauty. Then she poured out the whole tale to him, eagerly at first, but more and more slowly and diffidently as she went on, for, far from seeming overjoyed, the old man's face grew overcast with grief. When she had finished, he stood for a time unable to speak, and when at last words came, they came slowly and haltingly. "If you are glad, my daughter, why, I am glad, too," said he. "And yet—I thought the bad days were over for us—things were on the mend. I had a hope of spending the evening of my life in peace and

happiness with you to comfort me. But I ought to think shame to dull your happiness with such words. Fate wills otherwise, and I will go with you to that far-off land, if such be your wish. In any case, I shall not be with you long. Will you remember, amid your new life, my daughter, the care and tenderness we gave you here? Will you remember this worn face of mine, and the heart that loved you so well?"

And Rhodope said: "In this new life to which I go, the thought of your love will be a constant stay to me. Rather shall I forget anything than that. But now, haste. The ship waits in the harbour, and the sails are set. We must be away before the turning of the tide."

So, with a last look full of tender love, and a trembling smile, the old man went into the house to make his preparations, while Rhodope waited without, her mind full of dreams of the wonderful future.

Before very long the old man came forth again, with his wife by his side. In honour of the occasion the good wife had donned such finery as she possessed, while her husband had put on the scarlet suit he had worn years ago when he was rich and honoured, and sat at the same board with nobles and Kings. It was stained and patched now. The mother did not speak, but she looked timidly at her daughter, and bent her old grey head as though in reverence.

So the three passed to the market-place, where the envoys and the watching crowd, now bigger even than before, stood waiting. As they approached, the people began to shout and cheer, and Rhodope's father turned pale and trembled, so that she had to support him. Already she bore herself like a Queen, and, turning to

the envoys, spoke majestically. "It is my wish that we depart at once," said she. "Let us get on."

"All is ready, madam," said he who seemed to be in command. "The ship has been warped round, and her head points seaward. But first will you not be crowned, and clad in robes worthy of your high estate?"

"Nay," answered Rhodope. "Let the King see me as I am, wearing the humble garb in which you found me. Let us delay no further, for already the sun is getting low."

Then the party moved towards the quay. Rhodope's eyes were wet, her lips trembled, and she took her father by the hand. As for him, he was trembling, and his face was as white as death.

Soon they came to where the ship was waiting, and Rhodope crossed the narrow gangway that ran out from its side. With never a glance behind she moved forward to the prow, and stood there, gazing seaward over the water, while the gangway was drawn in, and the moorings cast off.

Slowly the sails filled and the ship began to move, but still Rhodope stood there. The shouting of the people on the shore behind grew fainter and fainter still, until it died into silence and nothing was heard but the wash of the waves and the straining and creaking of the timbers. The sun dipped below the horizon, the after-glow faded, the stars shone out clear and bright, but still Rhodope stood as one in a dream, hardly noting the freshening wind nor the spray that struck her face, and hearing neither the captain's orders nor the helmsman's answers.

At last she turned and looked around. No land was in sight, and nothing was to be seen but the dark waves

crowned with foam. A sudden terror seized her. She turned and ran along the deck, her hair, loosened by the wind, flying behind her. Then, stopping, she calmed herself suddenly and went again towards the prow, where, amid a group of his companions, the chief of the strangers stood.

"Where is my father?" said she. "Will you take me to him, please?"

The moon shone bright on her pale face, and the swaying lanterns in the shrouds cast strange shadows on the deck. The old man answered nothing, but stood gazing on her strangely, and as she marked his silence a sudden pain like death smote her heart.

"Your father never left the shore," answered the old man at last. "He told us that he would fain stay with his own folk, that he could never bear to meet the curious eyes of strangers in a foreign land. I thought he was wise in that, and did not press him. Surely you knew it was his will to stay?"

Rhodope could not speak, but she turned and gazed again in the direction of the land.

"We can go back, if it is your wish," the old man went on. "It will be two hours lost, but that is no great thing, although, indeed, it would be a pity to lose this splendid wind."

Rhodope reached out her hand and caught a rope to steady herself, for she felt her limbs failing. She tried to speak, to give the order to turn back, but no words came. She knew why the old folks had stayed behind—not because they dreaded the thought of living among strangers, but because they feared lest in her new-found splendour their daughter might come to be ashamed of

their low estate. And Rhodope looked into her own heart, and read the truth there, and she knew that her parents were right. Their love for her was greater than her love had ever been, or ever could be, for them.

“It is God’s will,” she thought, and turned away.

And the black ship sped swiftly over the grey, tossing waters.

THE LAND EAST OF THE SUN AND WEST OF THE MOON

I.

IN the land of Norway there once lived a certain man who had three sons. Two of these sons pleased their father because they were hard-working, and attended well to their duties about the farm; but the third and youngest son he thought a ne'er-do-well, because he took no interest at all in sheep or cattle, or in ploughing and reaping and sowing. During the long winter days this lad would sit by the fire and dream, while in the summer-time he loved to wander in the garden looking at the flowers and repeating rhymes and verses. "He is good for nothing," said the old man sorrowfully. "He has not strength of will enough to be either good or bad, and I very much fear there is nothing to be done with him but to let him go his own way."

Now, this farmer had a meadow of rich sweet grass which was his special pride and delight. Every morning he would go and look at it, for the time of hay-harvest was drawing nigh, and this year he counted upon having a more plentiful crop than ever before. What was his surprise and rage, then, to find one day, when he went to the field, that somebody or something had been there, and that more than a third of the long grass had been trampled down!

A moody and an angry man was the farmer that day, and at night, when his two elder sons returned from work, he said to them: "My sons, I have found to-day that much of the grass in our meadow is trampled down. This must be the work of some sneaking enemy, who either through malice or envy wishes to work us ill. Sneaking I call him with reason, for he is not bold enough to name his wrongs or to avenge them in a manly way. Now, son Thorolf, we must find out who this enemy is, and this is what you shall do. Take your bow and arrows, and go and watch to-night in the whitethorn brake by the side of the field. Be alert and wary, and we may perhaps bring the evil-doer to justice."

Thorolf rose unwillingly, for, truth to tell, this was a task he relished not the least bit in the world. He was tired out by his day's labours, and would much have preferred to spend the night comfortably in his warm bed. Nevertheless, he did as his father bade him, and, taking down his bow and quiver of arrows from the peg on the wall, set out for the thicket of thorn-bushes to his lonely vigil.

Unfortunately for the old man's plans, however, Thorolf had drunk heavily of strong ale after supper, and was very drowsy in consequence. No sooner had he snugly hidden himself among the bushes than he fell asleep, and did not awake until the sun was high in the sky. Alas! the mischief had been done, for another large patch of the meadow had been trampled down.

Downcast and ashamed, he returned to the farm, and listened with hanging head to his father's bitter scoffs and reproaches, nor could he find a word to say for himself, for he knew that he had been unfaithful to his trust.

The next night the old man called Thord, his second son, and gave him the same charge; and the same thing happened to Thord as had happened to Thorolf. All night long he lay in the thicket snoring like a clown, and awoke to find that while he had been sleeping the unknown enemy had been again.

Then the good farmer's rage broke out anew, and he roundly abused his sons, calling them sleepy-headed fools and gluttons who were good for nothing but to devour his substance. John, the third son, who was lying on the floor by the fire, stirred when he heard his father's voice, and yawned and stretched himself. "I suppose," says he, "I can bid farewell to any hope of a quiet rest. You will be wanting next to send me on this errand. Well, keep your heart up, father. I will go, and, fool though you think me, it's odds but I bring you back some news."

The father laughed scornfully. "Your brothers are sleepy-headed dolts," said he, "but *you*—you are a good-for-nothing zany, who have been a trouble to me ever since you were born! I do not know what I have done to deserve such children; but it's any port in a storm, and since you think you can succeed where your brothers have failed, you can try your luck. If you find the culprit, I will fill your cap with silver pennies to squander in the market-town."

To all this John answered nothing, but set himself immediately to prepare for the task he had undertaken. This he did by choosing a sheltered place under the trees in the orchard, and sleeping there very comfortably all the day. When the moon was high he arose, but he did not, like his brothers, take his bow and arrows, or any

weapon at all. "If I have desperate men to deal with," thought he, "they will slay me as sure as I draw bolt upon them, for I have no great opinion of my own shooting; and if they are not men, but monsters or fairies, then not the sharpest arrow that was ever fashioned will do them harm."

So, all unarmed, John made his way to the meadow and hid himself among the thick bushes in the hawthorn brake. He had slept so well during the day that he felt quite wide awake now, and for a long time he lay listening and watching, alert to catch any suspicious sight or sound.

The hours passed by, and nothing happened; only the bittern boomed in the marshes close by, and the fern-owl hooted and cried. The moon sank, the stars grew pale, and the first faint light of dawn began to brighten the eastern sky.

Then, just as John felt a most unaccountable drowsiness falling upon him, he heard a great rushing sound, like the wings of many birds beating the air. He sprang to his feet, and, parting the hawthorn branches cautiously, peeped out. There, on the grass within a yard or two of him, were seven white swans, strutting about and preening their snowy feathers.

"Oho!" thought John, "if this is all there is to see, I might have spared my time," and he bent down to pick up a stone to scare the birds away.

But the next moment he gave a gasp of wonder, and remained staring as though his eyes were starting out of his head. The swans had disappeared, and in their place stood seven beautiful maidens, while seven white swanskins lay on the grass almost within reach of John's hand.

You may guess how quiet John now remained in his hiding-place, fearing to move or even to breathe loudly lest a sound should disturb the fairy visitors. He thought he had never seen such beautiful creatures, and when presently they began to dance lightly upon the green grass, accompanying their movements with a singing so sweet that it put the very birds to shame, he listened and looked entranced. All the maidens were lovely, but there was one who was even lovelier than the others. She left her sisters after a little while, and came quite close to where John lay, so that he could see her plainly. She seemed fashioned of sunlight and air, so light and fair was she. Presently she picked up the swan-skin that had been hers, and stood idly for some time smoothing its feathers. Then, with a sigh, she laid it down again, and returned to dance with the others.

Now, John was a very young man, and with the first glance that he had given at this fairy maiden he loved her. He felt very sorrowful to think that very soon she would depart as suddenly as she had come, and that he might perhaps never see her again. He wished he could make her speak one word to him before she went away, and though he had heard that misfortune always fell upon people who disturbed the fairy folk, he was not a bit afraid. "I will take that swan-skin of hers," he thought, "and then she will have to speak to me to ask for it back."

No sooner said than done. John cautiously stretched out his hand and succeeded in drawing the skin towards him without being discovered. A few minutes after the eastern sky, which had been rapidly brightening, flamed with the first rays of the rising sun, and all the fairies



“PRESENTLY SHE PICKED UP THE SWAN-SKIN, AND STOOD IDLY SMOOTHING ITS FEATHERS.”



ceased their singing and dancing and hurried to the place where they had left their feathered dresses. The next moment six of the maidens were changed to swans again, but the seventh, of course, could not find her dress, and she gave a cry of despair when she discovered her loss.

That cry went straight to John's heart, but he controlled himself and lay still. The six swan-maidens crowded round their sister, ruffling their plumes in a troubled way; but as the morning light grew stronger they left her, one by one, though with many a backward look, and flew away.

Left to herself, the maiden buried her head in her hands and sobbed bitterly. This was more than John could stand. He was already very sorry that he had taken the skin, and he thought that now he would give it back. So he rose from his hiding-place in the thicket, and made a step towards the maiden.

At the first sound of the rustling leaves she started, and ran off as swiftly as the wind, her golden hair streaming behind her. John gave chase, calling out that she was not to fear, and that he meant her no harm, but she paid no heed, except to run faster than before. Then of a sudden she stopped, and crouched cowering to the grass, awaiting her fate, like a bird with a broken wing.

When John came up he found her trembling, her face as pale as death.

"Oh, what harm have I ever done to you that you should hate me so?" she asked.

John hung his head and looked very wretched and ashamed.

"Nay, lady, I do not hate you," he answered. "It was for love of you I took this dress. For having looked

upon you, I could not bear that you should go away and leave me sad and lonely all my days."

When she heard John speak these words the maiden was no longer afraid. She rose to her feet, and looked gravely at him.

"Because you have taken my swan-skin I am in your power, and must do your will. Yet if you force me to go to your own people, to dwell in your house, it will be but a poor triumph for you. There will I sit throughout the years, a thing of stone, hiding a heart that hates you."

Then tears sprang into John's eyes, and he said: "Take the dress and go. I would rather die than cause you pain."

At this the maiden smiled upon him, and John thought that there was something of tenderness in her smile.

"Do you indeed love me so?" she asked softly. "Would you give up everything for me?"

"Everything!" said John, and he meant it.

"Think well what you say," the maiden went on. "I am no mortal woman, and I can see somewhat into the future. If you let me go, and never see me again, you shall become one of the greatest men in your land, lord over wide dominions and with the power of life and death. Are you ready to give it up—this glorious future—and travel with me to my own country, there to dwell unknown, and with no reward save such as love can give."

John answered soberly: "What is power or wealth or glory to me? Love is best."

Then the maiden drew from her finger a gold ring set with a dark green stone. "Once again, I charge you, think well," she said. "The world holds many beautiful

and precious things, and delights such as you have never known. Will you renounce them all for me?"

John nodded, for he could not speak, and she set the ring upon his finger. And immediately a drowsy numbness stole over him, and as in a dream he saw her looking down on him. A soft breeze fanned his cheek, laden with the perfume of a thousand flowers. He closed his eyes in deepest sleep, and opened them to find himself in a far-off land whose beauty may not be told.

II.

Three years John dwelt with his fairy bride in peace and happiness, nor ever once did he regret that he had left the world for her sake. Then one day he thought that she seemed sad and moody, and he asked her what was the matter.

"Alas! dear love," she said, "there is a danger threatens us both, and I am sad for brooding over it."

At this he was greatly troubled, and he asked her from what place the danger came."

"It comes from your own land," she answered. "Yet you can avert it if you have the heart to part from me for a time. How say you, will you go?"

"Surely I will do your wish, whatever it may be," he answered. "But what is this danger? Tell me all about it."

"Nay, that I cannot," she said. "Only this I can say: the life of every one of us is made up of joy and pain, and although we long to take the sweet and cast the bitter aside, fate will not have it so. For these three years we two have dwelt in constant happiness, so that

a heavy debt of sorrow remains to be paid, and I must not tell you how or why.

"Now, listen: this is what you must do. Return again to your own land, and wait there patiently until I call upon you, by a certain sign, to help me. And in order that you shall not miss that sign, every evening at night-fall you must go to the place by the hawthorn brake where we first met, and wait there for an hour. If during that hour nothing happens, you may be sure that all goes well, and may return with an easy mind. Before you go, however, there is a warning I must give you. Often, I doubt not, in the lonely days that lie before you, you will long to see me again. Mind, however, that you do not let the least word of that longing slip from your tongue. If you call me I shall come, for such is the power of that ring of mine you wear that I cannot choose. As surely as I come, however, a dark fate will fall upon us, and our happiness may be shattered for ever."

So saying, she rose and embraced her husband; then she put her hand upon his forehead and spoke strange words, so that sleep, like a dark cloud, rolled over him, and he knew no more.

When he awoke he found himself lying on the grass in his father's meadow, close by the brake of hawthorn, with the hot afternoon sun flaming on his face. For a moment he could not remember where he was, nor what had happened to him. From where he lay he could see a leafless spruce-tree that he had once climbed in search of a nest, and the thought brought back to him the memory of his stern old parent.

"It is getting late," he thought. "I wonder how long I have been asleep. Dinner will be all cleared

away, and I shall come in for a fine rating from my father."

Thereupon he rose and began to walk towards the homestead, and it was not until he was half-way there that he suddenly remembered all that had happened to him since he kept watch for the persons who had trampled the grass in the field.

As he approached the house he saw many sights that reminded him of the old days. Nothing seemed to be changed at all. There was the orchard, the apple-trees laden with ripe fruit, and the windfalls lying thick at their roots. There was the oat-field with its many sheaves, and a labourer or two still at work. As he passed the poultry-yard an old speckled hen that he remembered well ran clucking across his path, and a little farther on, in the home-field, the one-eyed, patient cart-horse browsed contentedly.

For some time John lingered, taking his fill of all the familiar sights; then he turned towards the carved oaken porch of the homestead, and stood at the door awhile, hesitating to enter. From within he heard his father's voice, mingled with other voices of maids and men; but he could not make out the words. At last he caught up the horn that hung beside the door, blew a loud blast, and without waiting for an answer walked into the room; but first he drew his hood over his head so that his face could scarcely be seen.

The family was at supper. At the head of the table his father, in the act of lifting a silver mug of mead to his mouth, paused half-way and stared at the stranger. Thorolf and Thord, his brothers, after a careless glance, went on eating. The serving-maidens, with jug or plate

in hand, stood stock-still to stare, and an old serving-man, Haldor the Icelander by name, half drew his sword, as he saw the flash of arms beneath the stranger's cloak. None of these knew him; but his mother, who sat by the hearth busy with her spinning-wheel, turned pale and eyed him intently.

Those were hospitable times, and as soon as the first shock of surprise at this unceremonious entry had passed away the old farmer rose to do the honours of the house.

"So long as you come in peace you are welcome, sir," said he. "Come, sit by my side and eat and drink your fill."

"Thanks, goodman," answered John, in a feigned voice. "Your hospitality is welcome, for I am both hungry and footsore, and a stranger in these parts. I had been hunting, when I had the misfortune to lose my way, and coming to a stream, I dismounted to drink. Fool that I was, I neglected to hold fast the bridle of my horse, and no sooner had I bent to slake my thirst than a blue jay flashed suddenly from the bushes right under the nose of the beast, who must needs bolt incontinent, as though the devil were after him, leaving me to follow on foot like a churl."

"No churl are you, if I am any judge of men," said the old man. "But come, sit down to table. These bannocks are simple fare enough, but they should taste sweet to a hungry man."

So John sat down and made a hearty meal, and afterwards sat talking to his father, who knew him not the least bit in the world. And presently a maiden came in with hair of ruddy gold, who brought them mead, and John learned that Thord was married since he went

away, and that this was his wife. Thord had no eyes for anyone but her, and as for Thorolf, he was always drowsy after dinner, and it was not long before he began to snore. In the corner, however, the old mother still sat and mused over her spinning. She said nothing, but she smiled happily, for you must know that it requires more than a hood and a disguised voice and a change of dress to prevent a mother from recognizing the son she has brought into the world.

So the men sat and talked, and the women spun, until presently, as it grew late, the old dame spoke up with authority. "Now, Thorgerd, now Asa, to the weaving-room! And you too, Mary and Kirstin. We have much cloth to weave before Yuletide, and there is no time to waste."

The girls rose obediently and went away, not without a backward glance or two, and presently the men strode off to various evening duties, leaving John and his mother alone by the fire. They sat there for a time in silence, she spinning away busily and he in a brown study. Presently came little Asa, tripping back with an armful of clothes, which with a smile she laid down at John's feet. He looked at them, and saw that they were a dark blue cloak and hood embroidered in silver thread with figures of the sun, moon, and stars. Four years ago Asa had made that very cloak and hood for John to wear at the Yuletide revelries. Why had she brought them now? Could it be that she had sharper eyes than he thought?

He picked them up, and almost before he knew it put them on. As he did so memories of the half-forgotten time came back to him. He saw again the merry party

round the festive board, and the yule-log blazing high on the hearth. What was that song they had sung, telling of Christmas joy? John began to sing the words:

“Outlanders, whence come ye last?
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
 Through what green seas and great have ye passed?
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.”

“From far away, O masters mine,
 We come to bear you goodly wine,

“From far away we come to you
 To tell of tidings strange and true,

“News, news of the Trinity,
 And Mary and Joseph from over the sea!

“For as we wandered far and wide,
 What hap do ye deem there should us betide!

“Under a bent when the night was deep,
 There lay three shepherds tending their sheep.

“O ye shepherds, what have ye seen,
 To stay your sorrow, and heal your teen?”

“In an ox-stall this night we saw,
 A babe and a maid without a flaw.

“There was an old man there beside,
 His hair was white and his hood was wide.

“And as we gazed this thing upon
 Those twain knelt down to the Little One.

“And a marvellous song we straight did hear
 That slew our sorrow, and healed our care.”

“News of a fair and marvellous thing,
The snow in the street and the wind on the door.
 Nowell, nowell, nowell, we sing!
Minstrels and maids, stand forth on the floor.”

He ceased, and, looking up, beheld his mother gazing at him with a world of yearning in her eyes. At that he ran to her, and clasped her in his arms, and told her what, indeed, she knew already—that he was her son John, the youngest and best beloved, come home again. But he did not tell her where he had been all this long while, nor what adventures had befallen him; nor did she ask, for she was content merely to have him by her side.

And then they sat and talked, for he had a thousand questions to ask about all that had happened since he went away; and at sunset, when all the menfolk returned from the fields, and gathered together in the big hall, John cast off his cloak, and stood up before them in all his glittering gear and declared himself.

Great was the old man's surprise when he heard that this gloriously attired stranger, with golden mail on his breast and sword at his side; erect and brave and confident, was his son John, the fool of the family, the lad whom he had thought good for nothing. John's brothers, Tholf and Thord, did not seem overjoyed at meeting him, but they greeted him warmly enough, if somewhat clownishly; and Thorgerd, Thord's wife, came and kissed him on the cheek.

Days and weeks passed away, and John still dwelt with his kinsfolk in the homestead. Every night at dusk he made a lonely journey to the thorn-brake, and waited there an hour, but nothing ever happened. For the first few days he was happy, but in time he gradually grew moody and irritable, waiting for the call that never came, and wondering about the threatened danger. He could not keep it out of his thoughts day or night, and his

father often watched him sitting mum-chance by the fire, and muttered in his beard: "The fellow has climbed a rung or two of the ladder, that is all. He is still the same moonstruck calf that he was before."

So autumn waned, and the cold days of winter came on, with leaden skies and heavy falls of snow, and John grew ever more miserable and depressed. One night, as he waited as usual by the hawthorn-brake, he felt that he could bear the suspense no longer. "Oh, my love, I cannot live without thee!" he cried in his despair. "Come to me—oh, come—for I am lonely and very wretched!"

Then in a moment he realized what he had done, and a chill fear smote his heart. He stared about him apprehensively, expecting some sign or dreadful portent, and then, when nothing happened, fearing lest no sign or portent should come. The snow-covered field stretched white and silent before him; nothing stirred there; the dark sky gloomed above.

"I am betrayed!" he cried in an agony. "She was false to me, and she will not come!"

Haltingly he retook the homeward path. Snow had begun to fall again, and the wind drove the icy flakes full in his face, half blinding him. At last he reached the garth gate. What was that form that waited there, huddled up in a grey cloak, all alone?

John felt a sudden flash of joy. It was a woman's form, there was no doubt of that. He ran forward and seized her by the arm. "Have I done wrong, dear love?" he cried. "Can you forgive me? Speak, and drive my fears away!"

Then the woman threw back the hood of her cloak,

and John saw her face, and it was the face of Thorgerd, his brother's wife. She gazed wonderingly at him, but he, with a cry of despair, released her and ran into the house.

Now, it was Yuletide, and within the hall the men and women of the farmstead sat around the board making merry. There was no stint of good cheer, and many a horn of foaming mead was filled and drunk. At first John took no part in the revelry, but sat on one side, expecting he knew not what, and starting every time the wind shook the heavy door. Then, as the night wore on, and the feast grew more clamorous, he began to forget a little of his misery, and joined in the laughter and song.

At a very late hour John rose to his feet, and, lifting high a beaker of mead, called upon the company to pledge the memory of one of the heroes of old. Hardly had they done so than there came the sound of a horn close to the gate, and he set down the liquor untasted, trembling, and white as a sheet.

In an instant every man there present rose from the table and ran to seize a weapon, for in those troublous times, when strangers came to a man's door, it was well to prepare oneself before ascertaining whether they were friends or enemies. Again the horn sounded, louder and clearer than before, and a servant ran to throw open the big oaken door. In rushed the stormy wind, shaking the hangings on the wall and lengthening the ruddy flames of the torches into trails of black smoke. The hall grew dim for a moment, then the door shut to with a crash, and there in the midst of that astonished company stood a woman clad in robes as white as the snow.

Ah, what a cry of joy John gave when he saw her face,

and knew that his love had heard his call! He ran to her with arms outstretched, and for an instant they clung to one another, and she said: "Far away I heard thy voice, and I came. Let us rejoice this night at least."

Then John took her by the hand and faced his father and mother and all the guests, and said: "Kinsmen, behold my wife, who for my sake has left her own land, where she was of high estate. Will ye not bid her welcome?"

And he led her gently to the high seat at the end of the table, where his father and mother sat, and they kissed her, and wished her long life and happiness, and made a place for her beside them. And she sat there, beautiful and serene, and smiled as the merry-making went on, though her eyes were sad.

Later on, when all the guests had left, and quiet had descended upon the house, John and his fairy wife lay at rest within the chamber that had been prepared for them. John was fast asleep, dreaming, no doubt, of the happiness that was to be his, and he did not see the tears that flowed from his wife's eyes, nor hear the sobs that shook her frame. Alas, poor fool! by his own unheeding act he had drawn down upon them both a heavy weight of sorrow.

When it was nearly dawn his wife arose, and very gently, so as not to disturb the sleeping man, drew the green-stoned ring from off his finger, and said softly:

"Farewell, my love! I am going away to a land where thou canst never follow me, there to live lonely and unhelped through all time. Yet, perhaps, there is left still one last hope. Can this voice of mine pierce thy dream? Listen, then. I go to the Land East of the

Sun and West of the Moon. If thou canst hear, and will remember, it may be thou wilt find me again."

John slept on, and made no movement. For a time she stood looking down on his unconscious face, then silently she turned and went from the room. A shaft of moonlight shone on her white gown from one of the windows, and lighted up her face with a strange, unearthly beauty. The door opened before her, and the night wind stirred her hair. Then she stepped out in the snow, and the next moment had vanished, fading into its whiteness.

III.

It was morning when poor John awoke. He opened his eyes wide, and saw that the room was empty, and a terrible cry was wrung from his very heart. Now he knew the fate that his disobedience had brought upon him, and bitterly he reproached himself for his impatience and lack of faith. He did not go to search for his wife, for he knew that would be useless, but sat there gazing into the grey dawn with a face like stone. Presently he must go down and meet his father and mother and his brothers, and answer all their curious questions. "I can never meet their eyes," he thought. "I can never bear to look again upon the face of any man or woman to whom I am known."

He rose and stood for a while listening, but nothing stirred; then he dressed himself hastily and hurried from the house, hardly caring whither he went, so long as he could by movement silence his troubled thoughts. On and on he travelled, walking rapidly, until he had left the well-known paths behind, and then for hours on again,

over snow-covered wastes and high hills and frozen streams, until he saw before him the dark sea merged into the grey and lowering sky. Beside the sea stood a little harbour town, the white roofs of its houses gleaming, and at sight of it John became aware for the first time that he was worn out and faint for want of food.

So he went down into the town and found an inn there, where he rested, and in spite of his misery he slept like a log that night. And in the morning he was conscious of a tiny spark of hope in his heart, and he thought that if he could only find a ship and sail away over the sea, he would find his love at last.

But it was winter, and in that season no ships plied from the port, for great masses of floating ice made the passage dangerous. So John had to content himself, and wait for milder weather, and it was not until the coming of early spring that he was able to leave that town.

One day, however, he stood at the prow of an outward-bound vessel, and stared eagerly over the tossing waters into a sky that flamed with gold. All day he stood there, never moving, and at night he wrapped himself in a cloak one of the seamen had given him, and lay down on the deck. One evening, lying thus just about sunset, and staring upwards into the sky, he saw the pale ghost of a moon as it were caught in the shrouds, and suddenly a thought came to his mind, like a children's rhyme, and he found himself repeating:

*"The land that no man findeth soon,
East of the Sun, West of the Moon."*

The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon!
What land was that, and how came the thought of it into

his head? Could it be that Fate had taken pity on his misery, and sent him a sign?

A few days later the ship cast anchor in the little port of Dunwich in the east of England, and there John stepped ashore, glad, if truth be told, to stretch his limbs again. He did not linger very long in Dunwich town, for the people there were only simple traders who trafficked chiefly with his own people, and little they knew of any lands except those to which they sailed. John made up his mind to go to London.

The journey was a long one, and, of course, as he had to walk every step of the way, it took him a long time. At night he would put up at a wayside inn, or at a monastery, where the good monks were always ready to welcome strangers. He did not like to ask the guests at the inns or the monks if they knew the way to the Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon. He made sure they would laugh at him if he did, and no doubt he was right. But he invented a little tale of a man who set out to seek this strange land, and told it to the company assembled wherever he chanced to stay. Everybody praised the tale, and swore it was one of the most interesting stories they had ever heard, but no one showed any sign of knowing where the land was.

So John went on, and came to London at last, marching along the highroad to the tune that sang ever in his heart: "East of the Sun and West of the Moon." And, once there, he sought the acquaintance of chapmen, or pedlars, who were always travelling from one place to another; and he heard from them many tales of outlandish spots and wonderful happenings, but gained never a hint to help him in his quest. Next he tried the mer-

chants, and fared no better with them, yet he never gave up hope. In this way he spent several years wandering about the country, and his body became bent and shrunken, and he grew old before his time. Once he even wandered back to the old farmstead, and looked upon his mother's empty chair, for she was dead and gone. His father was still alive and hale, and so were his brothers, but none of them recognized in this bent and wizened fellow either the dreaming youth who had first gone away, or the splendid stranger who had come back.

Of all that passed during the years that followed this visit my tale says nothing, except that he went through many adventures, and often braved death, though he always came through unscathed, for he seemed to bear a charmed life.

At last, when more than a score of years had passed, he set sail once again in a ship that was going to the Indies, and there he saw many wonders among the magnificent cities of the East. One day he heard from a band of sea-rovers of a far-away land where the ground bore gold and gems, and a hope awoke in his heart that this might be the land he sought. So he joined the company, and together they chartered a little ship and adventured forth.

They had been at sea for many weeks when one night a terrible storm arose. John rushed on deck, and no sooner had he reached it than he was hurled backward by a mighty wave and carried helplessly along. Fortunately, he struck against the mast, to which he clung with all his strength, while wave after wave swept the frail craft, and the storm-wind sang in his ears. At last he could hold on no longer, and was carried away. He felt a heavy blow on his head, and then his senses left him.

Out of a great darkness he awoke to find himself lying on the sandy beach of a little bay. It was morning, the sky was bright and clear, and the sea was quite calm. No sail was to be seen on all its blue expanse, nor was there any sign of wreck upon the shore. John wondered, dully, what had become of the ship, and whether all his companions had lost their lives.

After a time he rose to his feet and began to look about him. The sand at the water's edge was thickly covered with sea-shells, and, picking up some of these to examine them, he found to his surprise that they were exactly similar to shells such as were strewn upon the shore of his own northern land. The sea-birds, too, that screamed over his head were all of a familiar type. He knew the call of every one of them. Turning his eyes inland, he saw green slopes rising gently to thickly wooded land, and beyond them, blue in the distance, a range of low hills. This was no tropic landscape, and John heaved a sigh of content, for he felt somehow that, after years of wandering, he was being led homeward at last to a place where he should find peace and rest.

Almost light-heartedly he turned his back upon the sea, and walked towards the distant hills. Among the forest glades he came suddenly upon a herd of deer, and was surprised to find that the gentle animals had no fear of him, and allowed him to approach unperturbed. It seemed that they had never seen man before, and, as John went on, and nowhere came across a house or any sign of human habitation, he began to think that he had landed in a country where no men lived.

About midday he came upon an apple-tree loaded with ripe fruit, which he found delicious; then, pressing on

again, he reached the treeless slopes of the higher land just as the sun sunk below the horizon. Having no mind to travel in the dark, he lay down and slept; but with the dawn he was astir again, and at sunrise stood on the crest of the hill looking down into the valley below.

The scene was one of surpassing beauty. The valley was narrow, and shut in between two ranges of hills, the lower slopes of which were covered with fields of golden grain, and terraced vineyards, and orchards. Through rich green meadows in the centre of the valley flowed a wide stream, and through the trees that lined its banks John saw the roofs of many cottages and farms.

As he stood there, looking down on the fair and peaceful scene, hope sprang once again into John's heart, and he said aloud: "Have I found it at last, the land which I have sought through all these weary years, the Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon?"

Quickly he descended the hillside, and reaching the valley, followed the curves of the river until he came to the houses among the trees. The people of the village were already stirring, and John passed many of them on his way, but they took no notice of him whatever. Men, women, and children alike gazed on him with dull, unseeing eyes. No smile lighted their faces; the children did not play, and they spoke no word either to him or one another. In one cottage the family sat at breakfast, and he looked in through the open door, hoping that they would invite him to join in the meal; but for all the heed they paid he might not have been there. A little farther on he came upon a sturdy fellow hewing wood, with a fair-haired child beside him. The faces of both were expressionless as wooden images; they

seemed as if moving in a sleep, and when John spoke neither answered a word.

Wondering greatly what all this could mean, and a little chilled at heart, John went on until, in the last curve of the river, he came suddenly upon a beautiful house, with walls of white marble gleaming in the sun. In the spacious courtyard was a fountain, and a number of maidens were there filling their water-jars. John spoke to one of them appealingly, but she did not answer, only gazing through him with cold and lifeless gaze. John felt a sudden desire to know whether she were really living flesh, and touched her arm, which in truth was warm and solid enough, though she paid no heed to the touch.

A crowd of richly dressed people were going in through the palace door, and John mingled with them, brushing against many a gold-embroidered cloak and jewel-hilted sword. They were all going in one direction, and in another minute John stood in a wide hall set round with many seats, upon which the strange folk sat themselves one by one. At last all were seated but John, and there was only one vacant place left, an ivory chair set on the dais under a canopy of gold. A sudden recklessness came over John. He would make this people speak even if it were only words of anger, and, barefooted amid the silken clad throng, he sat himself down in his rags on the throne of state, gazing around defiantly.

For all the effect he produced he might not have been there. Stony-faced servants brought in rich dishes and set them before the stony-faced guests, who ate in doleful silence. John, too, satisfied his hunger, and, rising before the meal was ended, left the hall alone.

He came now to a long marble cloister in which were many chambers with fast-shut doors. Listening at one of them, he fancied he heard the rustling of women's robes and the whirr of spinning-wheels. A choking sob caught his throat: he felt that he was on the verge of some great discovery. With hand on the latch he stood hesitating awhile, and then pushed open the door and entered.

The room was full of maidens busily spinning, and every one of them was fair to see. But John had no eyes for any of them, for there at the end of the room, on a chair of gold, a web of broidery across her knees—oh, there sat his long-lost bride.

With a cry of joy John sprang towards her, and then recoiled in horror, for her face was as stony and expressionless as the faces of all the others he had seen in this strange land to which he had come. Like death in life she seemed to him, for she did not move or appear to know that he was there.

A rush of tears blinded his eyes, and he seized her hands. "Oh, love, speak to me!" he cried. "Years ago I sinned and lost thee, and I have wandered far in many lands and suffered much; but what is that to me since I have found thee again? Wilt thou not speak and bid me welcome now?"

Still she gazed past him unseeing, and wildly he went on: "Is my sin not yet forgiven? Oh, I have paid the price in full! When first I found that thou wert gone I know not how I lived. All things were the same to me—the earth, the sun, the sky; nothing brought me ease of pain. And then one day a hope sprang to life within me, and comfort came I knew not how or whence. But

now I know," he cried, with a sudden flash of insight, "it was *thy* voice I heard—thy voice that pierced through my dream:

"A land that no man findeth soon,
East of the Sun, West of the Moon."

Ah, love, I have found it at last !"

As John spoke these words, with a great sigh as of one who throws aside a load of trouble, the maiden arose and stood before him, her eyes shining with love and joy. He felt her arms about him, and knew that the spell was broken at last.

At the same time each maiden in the chamber sprang to life. The stony look departed from their faces, they began to talk merrily to one another, and the sound of their happy laughter echoed through the room. Presently, hand in hand, the lovers left the palace, and wandered among the village folk, and there, too, the miracle had happened. The children shouted and played, the women went about their household tasks with cheerful singing, and the men whistled at their toil. The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon was a happy land, and the lovers dwelt there from that day onwards never to be parted again.

But where that land is, or who are the people who dwell there, or whether John and his fairy bride remain there still, my story does not tell.

THE DOOM OF KING ACRISIUS

I.

THERE reigned in the kingdom of Argos in days gone by a King named Acrisius, who had one fair daughter, Danaë. She was as good as she was beautiful, and everybody loved her, and her father most of all.

Now, it happened one day, when Danaë had grown to be a woman, that King Acrisius went to consult the Oracle by which the will of the gods was made known to men. And, questioning the Oracle about his future fate, he learned to his horror that in time to come his daughter Danaë should bear a son, and by that son he should be slain.

King Acrisius went back to his palace in fear and trembling, and for a long time pondered what was the best thing to do. At first he thought that he would send Danaë to wed some savage King far away in the snowy north; and then that he would hire some lying prophet to swear she must be sacrificed to appease the anger of the gods; and then that he would take her to a distant lonely wood and leave her there to be devoured by wild beasts. But although his fear had quite extinguished his love for his daughter, he shrank from the awful crime of shedding her blood, and abandoned all these plans, and many others, one by one.

At last the King had an idea. He called together the wisest craftsmen in his kingdom, and commanded them to build a lofty tower of brass, four-square, and stronger than any man had ever seen. Many a day poor Danaë would watch the workmen at their task, and as she saw the walls rising higher and higher she would wonder what the strange building could be for. She did not know that it was destined to be her living tomb.

One morning when Danaë walked that way as usual, she found the tower finished, and all the workmen gone. The door stood invitingly open; she could not resist the temptation to enter, and she did so, exploring the rooms one by one.

At the very top of the tower she found a chamber furnished as though for a Queen. The walls were hung with silken tapestries, there were chairs of ivory and ebony, and in the corner stood a little white bed. At this sight her wonder increased, and she said to herself: "When next I see my father I will ask him to tell me who is going to live here. It must be some man or woman my father fears, for it is quite plain that whoever is shut up in this tower will never get out again. The walls are so high and strong, and the doors so heavily bolted and the windows so small and closely barred that there is no doubt about it. Well, poor soul, whoever he may be, I pity him from the bottom of my heart! How awful to be shut up in this place for a lifetime, and never to see the sun, or the flowers, or the grass again."

With a little shudder of fear she turned to run away, but hardly had she made a step than she heard the sound of bitter wailing outside. She stopped, trembling, and thought: "Ah, this is the poor victim brought to his

doom already, and attended by his weeping friends." Slowly she descended the stair, and as she went the sound of the crying came louder and clearer.

Danaë had reached the arch, and was about to pass through when the door was thrust open, and in came a number of maidens, whom she recognized as her own companions. Their faces were stained with tears, and they struggled protestingly with two men-at-arms, who drove them on with drawn swords.

"What does this mean?" cried Danaë angrily. "Why do you treat my handmaidens so? You shall pay for this, if my father is still King in Argos!"

The rough soldiers dropped their eyes, and stood down-cast, shifting their feet as if ashamed. Then one of them said: "Do not count on your father, lady. It is by his command we do as we have done. With these maidens in this tower you must dwell for all your life, because an Oracle has told the King that one day you are to bear a son who will slay him. Forgive us, lady; we are the King's men, and have no choice but to do his will."

With that they turned and went away, and Danaë heard the heavy door clang to with a crash. The sound was like a deadly blow upon her heart, and she fell fainting to the floor. The weeping maidens lifted her, and bore her up the stairs to the chamber at the top of the tower, and laid her on the bed. And when she came to her senses and realized the doom that had fallen upon her, she moaned and wept as though her heart would break.

So passed many days of torment and despair; but in spite of all her misery Danaë never lost her beauty. Though often bathed in tears, her eyes were still clear

and bright, and the colour in her cheeks never faded, in spite of the fact that she never felt the sun.

One day she sat looking through the narrow barred window of her chamber, watching the sea-birds as they wheeled about in the air, and listening to the roar of the waves below. And suddenly a bitter revolt against her unhappy fate stirred within her, and she prayed to the gods for mercy.

Now, it so chanced that Venus, the goddess of love, was rising from the sea, and she heard the maid's complaining, and determined to save her if she could.

So off she sailed to Olympus, and presented herself before the father of gods and men, and said to him: "Dost thou know what deeds are being wrought in Argos? King Acrisius has shut his daughter up in a brazen tower because he has been told that she shall have a son who will destroy him. For his sins we have laid this fate upon him. Shall suffering now fall upon a guiltless head, and King Acrisius be saved alive because he thinks by this cruel deed to arrest his doom?"

"Be comforted, my daughter," said the Thunderer. "This thing shall not be, for no brazen wall, however strong, can hinder the will of the gods!"

So Venus went away, happy at her father's words, and passed over many lands carrying happiness and joy to the hearts of men, but within her dark tower poor Danaë still remained disconsolate. Sometimes she would pace to and fro in a fury of despair, clutching with feverish fingers at her raiment; and sometimes she would try to forget her grief and, gathering her maidens round her, begin to tell them some old and piteous tale, only to fall to weeping in the middle of it; but most of the time she

sat by her window looking at the sun by day and the stars by night, feeling the fresh wind blow upon her cheeks and yearning for freedom.

One morning she sat thus, in the early dawn, and watched the sun rise over the sea. The golden rays shone full upon her, lighting her hair so that it framed her face in glory. It seemed to Danaë that those rays carried a message of comfort to her troubled mind, and she grew calm.

The sunbeams streamed in, becoming yellower and brighter. And then, of a sudden, a great light flared, and she saw before her a glorious gold-robed figure.

"Fear not," said he, in a great voice. "The gods have heard thy prayer. I am Jove, and I have come to bring thee comfort. Soon there shall be an ending of thy woe, and thou shalt have a son, the fame of whose noble deeds will echo round the world, so that his name shall never be forgotten among men."

Then the light flared again, a crash of thunder sounded, and the god vanished as quickly as he had come.

The thing that Jove had promised came to pass, and Danaë became the mother of a boy. For the first time since her imprisonment she was now happy, and the only fear she had was lest her father should kill the child or take him from her.

One day, when the baby was only a few weeks old, armed men forced their way into her chamber, and led her out to the sea-beach, where lay a little boat with neither sail nor oar. Into this boat they bade her go with the child, and despite all her tears and piteous cries for mercy set her adrift upon the sea.

Now was poor Danaë in sore straits indeed. There was no food in the boat, and she had nothing to look forward to but a lingering death for her baby and herself. In her despair she prayed to Jove to help her, and the god heard, and caused a gentle sleep to fall upon her, so that she forgot her misery for the time.

Far out to sea there is an island which the Greeks call Seriphos. On every side but one its shores rise in steep and rocky cliffs, but on the south the land slopes gently down to a sandy beach. Towards this island a favourable wind, sent by Jove, bore the little craft in which Danaë lay. When she awoke the boat was already aground in shallow water, and, half an hour afterwards, the tide had ebbed far out, leaving the skiff high and dry.

Now, it happened that the brother of the King who ruled over Seriphos had ridden forth that sunny morning to go a-hawking, and, following the sea-fowl, he came at last to the place where Danaë had landed. He was very much surprised to see in that lonely spot the white-robed figure of a maid, with long yellow hair unbound, and he thought at first that she was some sea-fairy who had risen from the waves.

As soon as she saw him approach, Danaë fell on her knees and implored his aid, telling him her sad story.

“Do not fear, lady,” he said kindly. “This is no savage land, and you shall be treated here with all respect and honour. My name is Dictys, and I am the brother of Polydectes the King. Come with me to the palace, and you shall eat and drink and rest. To-morrow I will present you to the King.”

Then, because he saw that Danaë was very weary, he

set her on his war-horse, and, carrying the sleeping child, trudged by her side to the palace. There he handed her over to the care of the serving-women, who dressed her in royal robes, and after bringing her food and wine, led her to rest in a cool soft bed, where she slept dreamlessly until the morning.

At noon on the following day Dictys came to take her before the King, to whom he had already told her story. And Polydectes received her graciously, for he feared the gods, by whose will she had been cast away upon his land. "You shall have a fair house to dwell in," said he, "and many slaves, both men and women, to serve you. And the boat that brought you hither I will have overlaid with plates of silver and set in the temple of Neptune, for without doubt it was by him your life was preserved. As for the child, when he is old enough the priests of Pallas shall have him in their care, and teach him such wisdom as they can; but do not fear, for you shall see him every day."

So it was done. Danaë took up her abode in the house which the King gave her, and lived a peaceful, happy life. And day by day her child, whom she had named Perseus, grew in strength and beauty, and showed a wisdom far beyond his years.

II.

Eighteen years passed away, and Perseus grew to be a tall and comely youth, famed throughout the island for his strength and manly spirit. Many friends he had, but, quite unknown to himself, he had made one powerful enemy, and this was Polydectes the King. The monarch

was both envious and jealous of the young man, and seeing how the people loved and honoured him, he feared that one day he might attain to such power that he would usurp the throne. Therefore the King planned secretly to get rid of Perseus, and at last he found a way.

On a certain day in every year it was the custom for all the lords in the land to present themselves before the King and bring him a rich gift in token of their fealty. One would bring a horse or a sword, another a gold cup, or a valuable ring, and so on; and after all the gifts had been accepted a great feast was held.

Having attained his eighteenth year, Perseus was of an age to attend the feast, but, being poor, he had no gift to take with him. Nevertheless, he was too proud to stay away, and he stood aside, blushing red for shame, when all the other lords handed up their presents.

Now, some of the guests, who had been secretly bidden by the King to do so, began to gibe and jeer at the young man. But Polydectes looked at him with a smile and said: "Come hither, Perseus, and sit by me. I am rich enough to give you a gift rather than take one from you. Accept this golden cup in token that you are my friend."

Perseus looked at the King with grateful eyes, for he thought that it was a noble speech, and so indeed it would have been were it sincere.

"I will treasure this cup as long as I live," said he, "and though I am poor in worldly goods there is yet something I can give in return. Perhaps, O King, you have some enemy upon whom you wish to be avenged, or there is some difficult and dangerous task you wish performed. If so, send me, for here before these lords I swear that I will do whatever you bid me without fear."

"Spoken like a noble youth!" cried the King. "And as it happens, there is a task which I have long sought a brave man to perform. Far away over the western sea there is a desolate land where dwells the monster known as the Gorgon. A maiden she was once, wondrous beautiful, but she sinned against Minerva, and for a punishment the goddess banished her to that desert place and made her hideous to behold. So terrible is her face that if any man but look upon it he is straightway turned to stone. And instead of hair the Gorgon bears upon her head a brood of serpents. Now, if this Gorgon were slain, and I could gain her head, I should henceforth be invincible in war, for I should have but to show it to my enemies to strike them powerless. If, as you say, you really wish to serve me, you can do so in no better way than by getting this head for me. But I cannot tell you where to find the Gorgon's land; that you must discover for yourself."

Perseus looked grave when he heard these words, as, indeed, who would not? But he answered manfully, and said: "This is a dreadful task you set me, O King, yet, if I live, I will bring the Gorgon's head."

Straightway he left the hall, and went to a certain wise old man, and asked him where he must go to find the Gorgon's land. But the ancient shook his head and answered: "I have heard of such a place, my son, but know not where it is. If it is my advice you want, I counsel you to stay at home, for unless the gods themselves help you, there is no chance for you to succeed in such a quest."

So Perseus left him and wandered away towards the seashore, and came at last to the very place where his

mother had first landed on Seriphos. And there he met a withered old crone, who said to him: "What do you here, fair son, wandering in the cold night when there is feast and revelry in the halls of the King?"

And Perseus told the ancient woman his tale, and asked her if she could help him, though indeed he had little hope of help from such a source. And the crone smiled grimly, and said: "Have you weighed the cost? Do you know that no man may look upon the Gorgon's head and live?"

And Perseus answered: "If the gods give me grace to find the land where the monster dwells, they will help me also to lay her low."

And then he saw a marvel; for the moon came from behind a cloud, and its light shone full on the figure of the old woman. Its silvery rays enfolded her, and as Perseus gazed with wondering eyes she changed: her stooping figure became firm and upright, the lines in her face were smoothed away, and her scanty white hair turned to a wealth of flowing gold. No longer was she clothed in miserable rags, but stood forth resplendent in glittering helm and hauberk of mail. In her right hand she bore a spear, and in her left a shield

Now Perseus knew her for Pallas, the immortal goddess, and he bowed his head. But she smiled on him and said: "Be not afraid, O Perseus, for the high gods look upon you with favour, and in this quest you go upon you shall not fail. Now, take these winged shoes upon my feet; they are a gift from Hermes, the swift-footed messenger of the gods, and they will bear you swiftly over land and sea. This cap is sent by Pluto, the master of the underworld. When you are in danger or hard pressed, set it

on your head, and straightway you will become invisible. Vulcan, the smith, forged this blade, and by his wondrous craft made its keen edge so hard that neither brass nor steel nor flinty rock will avail to turn it. With these take also this shield as a gift from me; it will protect you from the monster's awful eyes. And now, Perseus, be strong and set forth with a good heart. Fly northward till you come to where a mighty barrier of ice parts the frozen sea from the frozen land. There dwell the three sisters of the Gorgons, whom men call the Graiæ. Only one eye they have between them, and they pass it from hand to hand. When you are come near them make yourself invisible; then snatch the eye, and do not give it back until they tell you the way to that land in the western sea where the Gorgon dwells."

She ceased, and cried "Good speed!" and Perseus sank upon his knees before her. But when he raised his head she was gone, and there before him on the sand lay the shoes, the cap, the sword, and the shield.

III.

The night was still young when Perseus began his long flight northward. Swiftly and tirelessly the winged shoes bore him through the air. Before the moon had sunk he saw far beneath him the black forests of Germany, and by the time the sun rose he had already passed over the Danube and the Rhine. Still onward he flew, and ever northward, and came at last to Thule, the ultimate land, with its bare cliffs jutting out into the icy sea; then onward and northward again until he saw the great wall of ice of which Athene had told him, shining

bleak in the pale light and washed by the waves of a leaden sea.

Now Perseus descended, and found himself on a snowy plain where there was no sign of either man or beast, except that near by stood a great palace of ice, with craggy towers and pinnacles. The door stood open, and Perseus entered, first drawing his sword, to find himself in a spacious and lofty hall upheld by milk-white pillars. There, at the end, on a dais, sat the three dreadful sisters. Long grey elf-locks hung over their wrinkled brows; they were withered and bent, and as they sat they passed their single eye from hand to hand and crooned a dreary song.

Perseus drew on his cap of invisibility, and, awaiting his chance, sprang forward and snatched the eye from the hand of the crone who held it. Feeling it gone from her, the wretched being gave a wail of despair. "O sisters," she cried, "he is here whom we were warned against so long ago, and he has stolen the eye. What shall we do? What shall we do?"

Then, at the thought that the one joy they had in life had been taken from them, and that they would never again look out upon their chill and dreary world, the three sisters set up a loud wailing and moaning.

But Perseus said: "I wish you no ill, and though I have taken your treasure I will give it you back if you will tell me what I wish to know. Show me the way to the land where dwells that woman with the brood of snakes for hair, whom men call the Gorgon."

"We will tell you nothing!" shrieked the sisters. "Give us back the eye, or we will lay a curse upon you, and bitterly will you rue the day."

But Perseus said: "Make haste! If you do not tell me quickly I will fling the eye into the sea, and you shall be blind for evermore."

Then the sisters broke out anew into wailing and lamenting, but yet they were loth to tell him what he wished to know. And one of them said: "Think again, rash youth. Is there nothing else for which you have desire? We can make you young and strong for ever, or raise you to be King of many lands, or give you store of wealth beyond the greed of man. Ask what you will of us except this thing alone."

And Perseus said: "I have named my price, and not all your words will make me change my purpose. Choose quickly, for I have not long to stay."

Yet for another hour the sisters could not be persuaded to tell. They pleaded and railed, and threatened, but Perseus paid no heed, and steadfastly refused to speak another word. Then at last their resolution failed.

"Hear what you wish to know, rash man," one said, "and we pray that the dreadful curse which has fallen upon us for knowing this thing may fall upon you also. From here fly east towards Scythia, but when you come to the wind-tossed seas turn south again until you reach the land of Spain. Thence, crossing the straits that part the ocean from the inner sea, keep westward, and you will come to the waste and desert land where the Gorgon dwells. No tree or shrub grows there, nor is there any green thing; no sun lights the day, or moon the night, but a grey and awful twilight broods for ever. Now, give us our own again, and get you gone."

So Perseus put the eye into the crone's outstretched hand and departed, and the last thing he heard as he left

the palace was the dismal crooning song. For many a day he flew southward as he had been directed, then turned westward from the southern point of Spain, and after another day and night saw beneath him the awful land which was his goal. Down its steep cliffs flowed a turbid yellow stream from the plain above, and as Perseus descended he saw on the banks of the stream a multitude of great and hideous birds who snatched writhing snakes from the teeming waters and devoured them.

Perseus could not help shuddering at this sight, but the worst was yet to see. Striking inland, he came to a high rock pierced with many caves, from the largest of which issued a lamentable noise like the cry of some creature in mortal anguish. Then Perseus knew that he had found what he sought, and, putting on his cap of invisibility, he entered the gloomy cave.

At the end of it two women sat, the sisters of those aged crones whom he had outwitted in the icy north. Their long white hair fell over their shoulders, and they remained motionless, with hands on knees, staring with a fixed and stony gaze straight before them. Unutterable woe was written on their faces, such as would strike a chill to the heart of the stoutest man, but more terrible still was the face of a third woman who paced wildly about the hall. Perseus did not look upon her, for he knew that to do so were certain death, but he held his shield so that it served him as a mirror, and in its polished surface he saw the reflection of a distorted visage, with eyes of eternal pain. It was the face of the Gorgon, Medusa, whom the gods had cursed and condemned to eternal misery. Round her brows a mass of writhing snakes lay in tangled folds, and now and again one would

crawl slowly down and twine itself around her arms and feet.

Dreadful were the groans and cries which the unhappy creature uttered, and she prayed continually for death, calling upon the gods to end her misery. The next moment her prayer was answered, for, unseen, Perseus passed behind her. His keen sword flashed and fell, and the Gorgon sank lifeless to the ground.

A loud and bitter cry rang from the two aged crones as they saw their sister's fate. Hither and thither about the dark cave they rushed, trying to find the slayer, but he eluded them easily, and picking up the hideous head, placed it in a wallet at his side, and left the cave and flew away, followed by their dreadful shrieks and curses.

IV.

With a light heart Perseus set out upon his homeward journey, but there were yet many dangers to be braved before he should see the isle of Seriphos again. At the end of one sultry day, as he was passing over the plain of Libya, he saw a huge palace beneath him, its roof covered with plates of silver. Descending close to its great door, he heard from within the sounds of feasting and revelry, and, thinking to find both food and shelter, he mounted the massive marble steps and entered.

A blaze of ruddy light proceeding from torches hung upon the walls dazzled his eyes. Round a board set in the middle of the room sat a number of huge men, black-haired and brown-skinned, with fierce and cruel faces. At the head of the table sat the King of the giants, who, seeing Perseus, cried out in a voice like the roaring of a

bull: "Step forth into the light, stranger, and let us see you!"

So Perseus stepped forward, looking like a pygmy among those huge creatures, but his courage never failed him, and he met the King's angry gaze with a bold answering stare.

"Who are you, little man?" cried the giant. "Surely in your land the sun must be weak to breed such tender folk. Are you a King's son?" And at this the giant roared with savage laughter, which was echoed by his followers until the hall rang again.

But Perseus did not quail. "Little were my might if I stood alone," said he, "but I am helped by the high gods, and enemies touch me at their peril."

The giant laughed again. "Take me this pygmy Prince," said he, "and break his neck, and hang his body up before my door to be a warning to other insolent jesters who may come this way!"

Then two of the huge men sprang up and rushed at Perseus, who laid his hand to the hilt of his sword. But of a sudden he remembered that he had a better weapon, and, retreating, he drew from the wallet at his side the head of the Gorgon, and shook the dreadful thing in the face of his opponents. They stopped, struck stone dead in their tracks without sound or cry, the snarl of anger frozen on their cruel countenances, their arms outstretched in act to slay. Then Perseus turned towards the King, and held aloft the head, and he, too, stiffened and died as he stood, half risen from his chair, with mouth wide open to hurl defiance. But the other giants, seeing the dreadful fate that had overtaken their fellows, cried out in fear, and rushed for the door, fighting madly with

each other in their eagerness to get away. When all were gone, and no one was left in the hall but the dead men, Perseus sat down at the table and ate and drank his fill; and, his hunger being satisfied, he made himself a bed upon some skins in the corner of the room and slept dreamlessly until the morning.

At dawn he was astir again, and, leaving the palace, wandered for a time across the burnt-up plain. Nothing there invited him to stay, for not a tree or blade of grass was to be seen; so, rising, he left the parched earth and flew north-eastward all that day. Below him the desert stretched for mile on weary mile, seeming as though it never would come to an end. When night fell, he was still on his way, flying over the same expanse of bare rock and sandy waste, where many a prowling beast haunted the half-dry watercourses in search of prey. The leopard, seeing him, drew back whining to its lair, and the lion, crouching over its kill, raised its head and snarled, its bared fangs gleaming in the moonlight.

But at last, as the sun rose again, Perseus saw the sea before him, and his heart rejoiced. And about the middle of the day he came to a land that rose in steep cliffs out of the waves, and, flying slowly along the coast, he reached a rocky promontory on which stood a tall wooden tower. It was strongly built of great oaken beams, and from its closely barred windows looked out the pale and haggard faces of many men and women. Their eyes were turned anxiously towards a little landlocked bay that lay to the east, and thither, wondering much what could be the cause of their evident fear, Perseus made his way.

Now, beneath the steep cliffs of the bay was a narrow belt of sand, covered by the water at high tide, and

strewn with rocks, on which cormorants and other sea-birds perched and uttered their piercing cries. Except these birds and the yellow hawks that swooped from the rocks above, Perseus could see no sign of any living thing; but as he hovered there, he thought he heard a faint sound that was not a sea-bird's cry. He listened. The sound came again, seeming to proceed from behind a crag of rock that jutted out almost to the edge of the sea. Scenting a new adventure, Perseus quickly drew over his head the cap which Pallas had given him, and, being thus rendered invisible, descended to earth, and silently walked over the firm sand.

He rounded the crag, and stopped short in utter surprise, for a strange sight met his eyes. There, bound to the rock with brazen chains that encircled her waist and wrists and ankles, was a beautiful maid. Her long golden hair enfolded her like a garment; her head was sunk upon her shoulder; her eyes were closed, and every now and then a tremor shook all her limbs and a low cry of pain escaped from her lips.

For a moment Perseus stood looking at her, then, taking off his magic cap, he approached and laid his hand gently on her arm. She opened her eyes and stared at him, wild with fear, striving to shrink even closer into the rock.

"Oh! art thou Death," she said in a faint voice, "and hast thou come at last to end my misery? I thank the gods that thou hast come in such a form, for I thought to see a hideous monster rise trailing from the deep to seize me in its clammy folds."

She ceased, and cast a longer look at the comely youth who stood before her, his eyes shining with pity.

"Thou seemest kind," she went on. "Never messenger of death had a face so bright as thine. Art thou a god? If so, take pity on me and save me, and I will praise thy name for ever."

"No god am I," answered Perseus, "but I am helped of the gods, and I doubt not they have sent me here to-day. When I have loosed you from these chains, you shall tell me of the danger that threatens you, and who has tormented you so." And with this he drew his sword and cut through the brazen shackles as though they had been thread. "Now, speak," said he, "and fear me not."

But hardly had he uttered the words than the maiden turned ghastly white and screamed, with outstretched finger pointing to the sea. "Look there!" she cried. "He comes—my death and thine!" She sank to the ground and cowered there, hiding her face in her hands, and Perseus turned seaward.

And there, far out, he saw a huge wave moving swiftly towards the shore, and on the crest of it a lather of foam, and through the foam he caught sight of a hideous snaky form. Nearer and nearer the monster travelled, churning the sea with its violent movements. Now it raised its horrible head, and Perseus saw a yawning mouth with huge moss-grown teeth, and two enormous eyes glowing red like flames. A strident roar, like the bellowing of a herd of bulls, rang through the air, and was answered by a trumpet blast from the distant wooden tower. Then with incredible swiftness the hideous creature drew its mass up on the beach, and made for Perseus with distended jaws.

Sword in hand he awaited it calmly. The huge eyes

burned within a yard of his face, he felt the sickening breath of the creature upon him, but with all his strength he swung his magic sword. It fell clear and true on the monster's wrinkled neck, and bit through to the bone; but so great was the force of the blow that Perseus staggered and fell among the writhing coils. In an instant, however, he was on his feet again. A second time the good sword flashed, and this time no further blow was needed, for he severed the monster's head from its body.

Then Perseus took the head and dragged it along the sands to where the maiden still lay cowering in deadly terror. "Look up! look up!" he cried. "See what a gift I have brought you!"

And the maiden, when she saw that the monster was dead, fell to sobbing bitterly, for her anguished mind gave way. But presently she dried her tears, and grew calm again, and Perseus drew her to a flat stone on the beach, and they sat there side by side and talked. And she asked the young man who he was, and from what land he had come, and he told her all his story from the time when his mother was imprisoned in the tower until the day when he slew the giant King in his palace in the Libyan desert, just as I have told it here. And at the end he led her to a still pool left by the ebbing sea in a basin of the rocks, and bade her look therein, and not for any reason at all to turn her head. Then he stepped behind her, and drew from his wallet the dreadful thing he carried there, and she saw in the water the reflection of the head which could turn men to stone.

"And now," said Perseus, when the Medusa's head was safe in the bag again, "tell me your name, and why you were bound to the cliffs with brazen chains." So she

took him by the hand and led him up the cliff path towards the town, relating her story as they went.

"My name is Andromeda," she said, "and I am the daughter of King Cepheus and Cassiope, whom men call the Fair, who rule this land of Syria. In that very spot where you found me chained there stood once an altar to the daughters of the sea. Thither on certain days in the year the young maids of the town were used to resort to offer gifts of honey and oil and wine, such as the gods delight in, and to dance to the music of flutes.

"On one festal day I was there with many another maid, and from a distance, as the custom was, our mothers stood and watched us. And when the rites were done, Cassiope the Queen, who took great pride in me, stepped forward, smit with sudden madness, and cried: 'Why do we pay honour to gods we know not? Fair the daughters of the sea may be, but you, my daughter, are fairer still. Go forward, then, and mount the golden throne, and let us all do homage before you.'

"All of us stood trembling when we heard these words, and after a time we left the place in silence, fearing lest some dreadful fate should fall upon us because of the anger of the gods whom my mother's words had outraged. Yet even there her madness did not stay, for she caused a silver image of me to be made, and on the plinth was graved the words, '*Fairest of all,*' and she bade her slaves carry it down to the sea and place it on the altar.

"Great was the terror that then fell upon us all, and not a cloud darkened the summer sky but we feared that it portended the wrath of the gods. For weeks nothing happened, and then one day I woke to hear the sound of dreadful weeping and wailing in the streets. I did not

dare to ask the reason for that outburst of bitter grief, but I learnt it soon enough. The maidens of the town, as their wont was, had gone down to pay their homage before the sea god's shrine, when in the very midst of the festivity there came up from the sea the monster you have slain to-day, who seized the fairest of them and devoured her.

“After that, each week the creature came and carried off a maid, and though brave men went out to try and slay him, they could never prevail, for against his tough and wrinkled hide the sharpest darts and spears were as things of wood. So it went on for many weeks, until people began to look darkly at me in the streets, and some mothers who had lost their children cried out that I was the cause of the curse that had fallen upon the land. Quickly the murmurs grew, and the priests fanned the flame of the people's anger, saying that only by my death could the anger of the outraged gods be appeased. And one day, as I sat trembling in my bower, they came and took me, and bound me with chains to the rock, and retreated to the strong tower they had built to wait what should befall. The rest you know.”

By the time that Andromeda had finished her story they were come to the gates of the tower. The door was still shut fast, and the terror-stricken people cowered within; but Perseus struck a resounding blow on the door with the hilt of his sword, and cried: “Come forth, warders, and shrink no more behind your battlements. One man has done what thousands feared to do, and the monster is dead!”

Then the door was opened, and a man peeped round it cautiously; but seeing the gory head which Perseus

held aloft, he gave a cry of joy, and threw the door open wide. Then out came all the people, men and women, shouting and laughing for joy, and crowding round Perseus to kiss his hands, fawning upon him, and calling him their deliverer.

Thus, in a kind of triumphal procession, attended by the excited crowds, Perseus and Andromeda went to the town, and made their way to the palace, where, in the porch, King Cepheus awaited them. Cassiope, the Queen, was there, too, cured of her pride, and pale with the pain she had suffered.

Then the King said: "What reward shall I give you, O stranger, for saving my daughter? Will you reign over half my kingdom, or shall I share with you the treasures my kingdom holds? Ask what you will, and it shall be yours."

Perseus smiled and answered: "Your kingdom I covet not, since such unhappy things can happen there; but there is one treasure I desire: give me your daughter to be my wife. And fear not that I am lowly-born and not worthy of her hand, for I am sprung from lineage as lofty as your own. Danaë was my mother, daughter of King Acrisius, who reigns in Argos, and those that know call me the son of Jove."

Then the King was glad, and willingly agreed to what Perseus asked. And he bade his slaves bear away the head of the monster, and set it in the temple, and cover it with gold and jewels, so that its ugliness might not be seen. "To-morrow," said he, "you shall wed with Andromeda, for I see that you have won the maiden's heart. We will solemnize the marriage with all due ceremony and sacrifices to the gods. And afterwards I

will make ready my ship that sails yearly to the south, and you shall sail in it, with your bride, back to your own land."

V.

Early next morning the whole city was astir, for, hearing that the monster was dead, and that the hero who had slain it was to marry the Princess, people came from far and near to see the marriage feast. In Andromeda's chamber the serving-maidens dressed her for the coming ceremony, bringing out webs of silk so soft and fine that they seemed like woven mist, and cloths embroidered with gold, and jewels worth a King's ransom. When all was ready she went forth to meet Perseus in the temple, passing through streets that were gay with flags and carpeted with flowers, while the dense crowds of people that lined the way on either side cheered her to the echo. Her face flushed with pleasure, but she could not help remembering that it was only a day ago since she walked through these streets in another fashion, chained hand and foot, and followed by sullen and moody glances.

At last all was done; the sacrifices to the gods were made; the flame rose high on the altar, and the two, having declared their vows, were made man and wife. Then, hand in hand, they returned to the palace, where the rest of the day was to be spent in feasting and joy.

Now, there was a certain lord who had been a suitor for Andromeda's hand, and the King had pledged his word to this man that he should wed his daughter. Hearing from trusty friends of the King's breach of trust, this lord, whose name was Phineus, made up his

mind to attend the feast as an unbidden guest, and if possible to carry the maiden away. At sundown, therefore, he entered the hall with a large number of men-at-arms at his back.

Seeing him thus enter, all armed and threatening, the King arose in fear, but Perseus, who was sitting at his side, smiled and said: "Who are ye? Have you come to show feats of arms in honour of my wedding, or are you servants of the King, just returned from distant wars? I like not your faces, but, anyhow, sit ye down and make merry, for on this day the King feeds good and bad."

At this, mad with rage and jealousy, Phineus snatched a javelin from his belt and hurled it at the smiling youth. It whizzed through his hair, and entered deep into the brain of a servant who stood by his side.

Then Phineus turned to the King, and cried: "Cepheus, what do you here, drinking with a robber who has stolen that which by right belongs to me? You pledged me your word! Will you redeem it now, or will you die? Ho, friends! to me! to me!"

His cry was answered by a clash of arms, as his men drew sword from scabbard and rushed to his side. Cepheus, pale with fear, attempted a stammering explanation, praying Phineus not to disturb the feast, but to go away, and promising him rich gifts. But Perseus stepped forward with a frowning face.

"All friends to me get behind my back!" he cried, and his fingers played with the fastening of the gold-embroidered wallet that still hung at his side.

Then, to the angry foes who stood ready with weapons drawn, he said: "I give you the choice between life and

death. If you would live, go out from yonder door and pile your arms and armour on the grass."

A fierce shout answered him, and the voice of Phineus rang loud above all the rest. "Take him alive," he screamed; "no sudden or merciful death shall be his, but a death by inches at the torture-stake!" And, howling like a pack of wild beasts, the crowd came on.

But in a moment the cries were hushed to a sudden deathly silence, for Perseus drew from his wallet the Gorgon's head, holding it aloft by the snaky locks, and before the baleful gaze of those awful dead eyes every man stiffened and died. Erect in his place each stood in the very attitude of life, with sword point thrust forward and mouth open in the very act to shout.

Then Perseus covered up the head again and turned to the frightened company who cowered behind him. "Come, friends," said he, "drink one last cup to wish me good voyage and good fortune. And as for this rabble, forget them, for they are rightly served."

At sunrise next morning Perseus and Andromeda boarded the King's ship that lay ready to depart with the turn of the tide. And before they went the King's slaves brought them many a bale filled with costly and beautiful things which would make Perseus a rich man for ever. The last good-byes were said, the ship drew slowly out of the harbour, and before a freshening breeze all sail was set for the island of Seriphos and home.

The voyage was calm and uneventful, and some days later the vessel put in to the well-remembered bay. So anxious was Perseus to see his mother again that he could hardly wait until the galley was beached, but

sprang ashore, and hurried towards the King's palace with Andromeda at his side.

As he drew near he heard the sound of cries and the clashing of weapons. He recognized his mother's voice, and, rushing forward with redoubled haste, burst into an open forest glade near the temple of Minerva. A cry of rage issued from his lips, and his eyes flashed fire, for there, crouching at the foot of the shrine, lay Danaë, and across her prostrate body stood Dictys, the brother of the King, manfully fighting to keep back a horde of armed men led by the King himself.

With a cry Perseus rushed forward to his mother's side, sending two of the assailants sprawling in different directions. At sight of him Polydectes shrank back, muttering. "So you are come again," he said, "and the story I forged was all in vain." Then, aloud to his men: "On! take the men dead or alive, but do not slay the woman."

Thus encouraged, the assailants again rushed to the attack, and the brave Dictys grasped his sword firmly and prepared to put up a good fight for his life. But Perseus stepped in front of him, and drew the Gorgon's head from his wallet, crying as he did so: "Take the gift you bade me bring you, O King. Henceforward you will never ask any service of man again, except to cast a little earth on your grave!"

So saying, he held the head aloft, and the King and such of his ruffians as also gazed upon the baleful face died as though struck by lightning. One or two, however, escaped, and these, seeing the fate that had overtaken their companions, fled shrieking from the place.

Then Perseus turned to his mother and flung his arms

about her neck. Brave Dictys, too, he embraced, and heard from him the story of the King's treachery.

By this time the people had somehow heard of the fray that was toward, and came crowding to the scene of it. There, finding their King dead, and carried away by the noble beauty of the young hero, they cried out that he should be King in Polydectes' place, and reign over them.

But Perseus said: "Not so, my friends. In an hour I must set sail again for Argos, to visit my own kin. But see, here is a man, trusty and brave, and loved by all the gods. Make Dictys your King, and be assured that he is worthy even greater things."

So it was arranged, and, a short time afterwards, leading his happy mother and his wife by the hand, Perseus went down again to where the good ship lay waiting in the bay. There he bade farewell to Dictys, giving him a long hand-clasp that spoke more than words, and soon the vessel was on its way.

For a day and a night they sailed on before a light and favourable breeze, but on the morning of the second day, when they began to think that they must already be near to Argos, a storm came on, and drove them out of their course to the northward. Beaching the vessel in a sandy cove, Perseus stepped ashore and inquired of some fisherfolk in what land he was. They told him that the name of the country was Thessaly, and that a few hours' march inland lay the great city of Larissa, where the King was even then presiding over the games which were being held in honour of his dead father.

A desire came into Perseus' mind to see this city, for he thought that there he might win news of Argos and

find out whether he was likely to be received in peace. So with rich gifts of gold he hired a number of the men to lead him through the mountains to Larissa.

Now, in these games held by the Greeks it was the custom to allow any stranger to take part who wished to do so, and Perseus competed with the other guests in many trials of skill. In all of them he proved the winner: he was the best swordsman, the fleetest runner; his aim with the javelin was the truest, and in the wrestling matches he overthrew all comers. Seeing his strength and beauty, the onlookers began to cry out that he was a god disguised, but Perseus did not declare his name or condition; nor did his guides tell what they knew, for he had bribed them to keep still tongues.

At last, when all the other games were done, there came the last trial of all—the casting of the stone. Men with famous names, Greeks whose deeds were known throughout the world, took part, and, seeing how fast and far they threw the stone, everybody began to think that the stranger would be beaten at last.

Perseus stood aside until all the competitors had finished, and made no motion to try his hand. But the King cried out to him: "Come, stranger, can you win in this trial as in all the rest?"

"Forgive me, King," answered Perseus; "I think it best to tempt the Fates no more. I must be gone, for I have many weighty matters to attend to."

"Do not say that," answered the King. "Try just one cast. I have a guest with me who would fain see what strength you can put forth."

"Very well," said Perseus, smiling. "Give me the stone, and guard your heads; for once it has left my

hand the gods guide it, and who knows where it may light !”

So saying, he poised the stone in his hand, while an old man who had been close at the King's side stepped forward eagerly to see. But at the very moment when the young man was in the act to throw, this old man thought that he would be able to see better if he crossed to the other side of the ground. Gathering up his robes, he ran swiftly in front of Perseus. A warning shout sounded in his ears, and, hearing it, he wavered and stopped in the very middle of the course. A second shout sounded, this time of horror and fear, but the old man did not hear it, for at that moment the great stone crashed into his skull, and he fell lifeless to the ground.

Then women shrieked and men shouted, and the crowd, leaping over the ropes, ran to the mangled body. Perseus ran, too, sick at heart for what he had done, and cursing the fate that had allowed him to cast the stone without looking to see that the course was clear. On the outskirts of the crowd the King met him, and Perseus asked sorrowfully who the victim was.

The King eyed him strangely. “It is the will of the gods,” said he. “The dead man was Acrisius, the father of Danaë, who, for fear of her unborn son, shut his daughter up in a brazen tower. Now he has met the fate which long ago the gods laid down for him. The world is wide, stranger. We have nothing to do with this your deed, but I counsel you to go, and go quickly.”

Perseus took him at his word, and, rejoining his band, went slowly back towards the ship, pondering as he went on the strange ways of gods to men. And when he was come again to Andromeda, he told her all, and said:

“ Though I slew this man unwillingly, yet his lands and wealth are mine, and I am King in Argos this day. But I will not win a kingdom by blood, lest the wrath of the gods fall upon me. Now, therefore, we will set sail in this ship of ours, and go whither the winds carry us, perhaps to find fortune in some happier land.”

So after due sacrifice to the gods, Perseus once again put out to sea, and after four days more they landed in a country called Argolis, which was very rich in horses and cattle. There Perseus abode with his mother and his bride, and after a time the people chose him for their King. For many years he reigned there in peace and happiness, and founded the great city of Mycenae, which is famed to this day, and there, full of years and honour, he died.

OGIER THE DANE

I.

THERE was mourning in a city of Daneland near the sea. In an upper chamber of the palace the Queen of the country lay dead. Stretched out upon the royal bed, beneath a golden canopy, her body lay, decked out in royal robes, and by the bedside sat the King, his head buried between his hands, weighed down with tearless misery.

In a cradle at the other end of the room a baby lay sleeping peacefully, and round him the nurses gathered, talking together in whispers. Now and then they cast anxious and pitying glances at the stricken man who sat beside the bed; but the King paid no heed to anything at all. He sat there motionless, staring with unseeing gaze straight before him.

Dusk fell. A quiet-footed attendant lighted the watch-candles, and, having set them round the bed, tiptoed from the room. With the dark a silence solemn and heavier than before seemed to settle on the chamber, lighted only by the flickering taper flames. Now and again the baby stirred and cried, and a nurse hurried to comfort it.

So the night passed. A little wind arose from the sea and moaned softly by the casements, rustling the rain-sodden leaves on the garden path below. One after

another the candles flickered and went out, the sudden leaping of the flame before it died shining on the features of the dead Queen so that they seemed to move. Worn out with watching, the nurses had fallen asleep; and gradually the sweet gift of sleep came to the sorrowing King as well. His eyes closed, and his arms dropped to his side.

Then, as complete silence fell upon the chamber, the sound of light footsteps was heard upon the stair. The door swung open silently, and one by one six ladies passed into the room. They wore crowns of gold, and their raiment was bright and gay-coloured.

Then she who was first among those ladies stepped forward to the cradle where the child was lying, and stooped and kissed him. And she gave him a gift, saying: "Through all your life you shall know neither fear of death nor shame, and the breath of slander shall never sully your fair fame."

Then the second lady stepped forward. On her brow she wore a crown of rubies, and she was dressed in a hauberk of golden mail. There was no smile on her face, and her eyes were stern and hard as she took the sleeping babe. "I, too, bring a gift," she said. "So long as you live, war and strife shall be everyday things for you, and there shall be full opportunity for you to win by deeds of valour a glorious name."

She stepped back, and another quickly took her place, eager to bring her gift that should undo the danger of the one that had gone before. "In turmoil you must live," said she, smiling, "but this at least I can assure for you, that in deeds of war neither defeat nor shame shall ever be your lot."

“ Mine is a simpler gift,” said the fourth, “ yet take it for what it is worth. You shall be gentle of speech, and in courtesy ever the first of men.”

The fifth sister was grey-eyed, and her face was very fair. She bent down tenderly over the sleeping child and said: “ I give you love, dear little one; it is the best gift of all. See that you use it well.”

And now came the sixth and last, and she was fairest of them all. For a long time she stood gazing down on the child, and then, very softly, she whispered: “ I, too, bring happiness, but it is a happiness you shall know only when the sands of life have run out. When the last of your glorious deeds on earth is done, and life has yielded all its joy, then, Ogier, you shall see me again in a land where the turmoil and sorrow of the world may be forgotten in a life of peace and joy.”

Then those six ladies passed as they had come, and the door swung noiselessly behind them. The grey light of dawn brightened, the last of the guttering candles went out, and a ray of sun shone through the casement. One by one the sleep-dazed watchers stirred, and the baby smiled in his sleep.

II.

Many years have passed away, and it is again evening, but in what a different scene. In the west, where the sun is setting, the sky is clear, but eastward the heavens are filled with masses of cloud, black and lowering at the centre, but tinged at the edges with purple and green and gold. Beneath the sky a bare, rocky island rises from the sea. At the base of its sheer cliffs the great waves

thunder unceasingly, dashing against them in clouds of foam. No tree, no green thing is to be seen in all that land, yet it is plain that many a man must have sailed there, for on the rocks below the cliff, half-submerged by the ebbing tide, may be seen the wrecks of ships, with the swirling water dashing in and out between their gaping ribs. That island has no name, and is marked on no seaman's chart, and those who find it never return again. This is the lodestone rock, told of in many a tale. Woe to the ship that approaches the rock too close, for, as by a giant's hand, it is drawn out of its course and piled up upon the iron cliffs.

The sun sinks at last, and the pale moon climbs the sky. Its silvery rays pour down and shine upon an old white-haired man, the only living creature in that desolate place. He is arrayed in royal garb, but the gold of its bordering is tarnished by the sea, and the colours faded. Weakened as he is by exposure and want, his huge frame shows the strength he once possessed, and in spite of the lines of suffering with which it is graced, his face is frank and noble.

He speaks: "God, Thou hast made me strong. Nigh upon seven weeks have passed since our vessel was wrecked and we were cast here ashore. Five days ago my last companion died, having eaten the last of the bread that was left. And yet I cannot die! Nay, it even seems to me that my old strength is unabated, and on a field of battle I could still wield my sword. That had been a good death indeed—to die in the heat of conflict, with my banner waving above my head and trusty friends striving at my side. Yet what matter where and how? On his last journey each man of us must go forth into the

dark alone. Ogier the Dane am I, who in the height of life never knew a fear of death. O God, I am alone with Thee, and truly it seems a little thing to die !”

He ceased, and sleep fell upon him. But he awoke again before the night was half done, and sat waiting for the day. And as he sat there, it seemed to him that he heard the sound of soft, distant music, and a sudden light that was not the light of the moon streamed across the bare rock.

“ This is death,” he murmured; but as he said the words he thought he heard a voice call his name—a soft voice that came sighing on the wind.

He rose to his feet, and stood awhile with bowed head. Then, “ I am ready,” he said. “ Which way shall I go ? Show me, I pray, some sign.” Then he turned towards the east, and beheld there a light that shone as bright as day, and he began to walk towards it. Over the rocks he went, his eyes steadfast on the beckoning gleam until he came to the further shore of the islet; then suddenly the light vanished as quickly as it had appeared.

Now it seemed to Ogier that the way of his death had been clearly pointed out to him, and he began to descend the cliff. Stepping from ledge to slippery ledge, now poised on a jutting crag, now hanging by his hands alone, he at last reached the rocks below, and stood for a moment gazing seaward. Then, with a loud cry, such as in olden time he had uttered in the press of battle, he leaped from rock to rock, splashing through the waves, which rose ever higher and higher until they reached his waist. Drawing his sword, for it was his wish to meet death sword in hand, he poised himself for the final plunge.

Just then, as he raised his head for one last glance

over the heaving sea, he saw a dark speck rising and falling on the waves before him. It came rapidly nearer and nearer, and Ogier saw that it was a boat, rowed by no visible hand. Soon it stopped close by his side, and, sheathing his sword, Ogier climbed within. The boat was empty; there was neither sail, nor oar, nor rudder, and the seats were covered with soft silken cushions, which, strange to say, had not been touched by the water, and were quite warm and dry.

Ogier felt the boat begin to move as soon as he stepped aboard. Then a sudden drowsiness fell upon him, and, casting himself down upon the cushions, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

When he awoke the sun was shining full on his face. Rising, he saw that the boat had come to rest in a little bay, close to a beautiful shore. A tall tree arched over his head, the ground was carpeted with brightly coloured flowers, and the air was sweet with perfume and musical with the song of birds. Ogier was sure now that he had passed through the gate of death, and had attained the land of Paradise, and, wondering, he stepped ashore. But directly his feet touched land a coldness struck through his limbs, and he felt his strength ebbing fast. Tottering on, he reached at last a high wall in which was a gilded wicket gate, and, opening this, he passed into a lovely garden. One glimpse he caught of its amazing beauty, then his eyes grew dim and he fell to the ground. But ere utter forgetfulness swept over his mind he heard a gentle voice that seemed to come from far away. As in a dream he saw a lovely face flit before him. Then he knew no more.

Once again, after the lapse of what seemed an eternity

of time, Ogier awoke, and felt renewed within him all the strength of youth. He was still in the beautiful garden, and by his side stood a maiden. She was gowned in a filmy raiment bright as a butterfly's wing, her glorious hair was garlanded with a wreath of roses, and on her breast burned a great ruby that was as red as blood. She smiled upon Ogier, and stretched out her arms as though to greet him.

"Who are you?" he stammered. "What is this place? and how am I who yesterday was a hundred years old cured of all the ills of age? Alas! I fear that I am in a dream."

The maiden smiled again. "What matters a name? Call it a dream if you will. But in the bliss that lies before you the memory of your troubled days on earth shall be a dream indeed. Many years ago, when you were born, I promised that when your days on earth were done you should come to this happy land. Now you are there, in the place that men call Avallon, and me they call Morgan le Fay."

Then the maiden drew from her finger a ring of gold, chased with strange figures, and put it upon the finger of Ogier, and said: "So long as you wear this ring you shall never change, but shall retain for ever your new-found youth. In this land of Avallon all are young and fair and happy as I am, and as you will be."

Then that fairy maiden led Ogier through the whispering trees to a wondrous house, from which bands of singing youths and girls, all garlanded with flowers, came forth to welcome them. And she led him to a golden throne, and bade him be seated thereon, and placed upon his head a crown of gold. So Ogier dwelt there in that

land of Avallon, where there is neither time nor seasons, nor any pain, and truly his life on earth seemed but the memory of a troubled dream.

III.

Again a hundred years pass by. We are in France, which is devastated by war. Round the gates of Paris throng an eager and anxious crowd, pressing round every horseman who rides into the city. "Have the invaders burned Harfleur, as rumour tells?" "Does Rouen still hold out against its besiegers?" "Is it true that the Pont de l'Arche, which spans the Seine, has been destroyed by fire, or that the Constable has overthrown the heathen army in the lower marshes of the river, so that their long-ships, being forced to turn back, were caught by the tidal wave and cast ashore?" Such questions as these, and many more, the anxious people ask every new-comer.

But now, as the sun sets, a stranger approaches the gates, riding on a magnificent charger and attended by two men-at-arms. He is a noble figure of a man, attired in rich raiment of the fashion of a bygone day. He is of huge and stalwart frame, and seems to be no more than thirty years of age, for in his golden hair, falling to the shoulders, there is no speck of grey. His bronzed features are set in noble lines, and his eyes are clear and frank.

The warden stops him as he comes to the gate, and demands his pass, asking his name and station. He answers that men call him the Ancient Knight, and that he has come from St. Omer to fight in the King's battles. Then, casting a puzzled glance at the motley crowd around him, all townsmen, undersized and weakly, he

says: "St. Mary! is it such men as ye who do battle against the heathen hordes? The warriors who stood beside the Hammer-bearer in years gone by were of a different breed."

Angry mutterings broke out among the crowd as he spoke these words, and a mocking voice cried: "Fear not, my masters! Here is Charlemagne come again—stepped down from his tomb to save his beloved city."

The stranger started, and turned a frowning glance on the man who had spoken; then without a word he rode on.

The stranger was Ogier the Dane, whom we last saw in the beautiful land of Avallon. Why, then, has he left that place, and returned once more to taste the fierce joys of war? It happened in this way:

One day the fairy lady had come to him and said: "Ogier, thy name is fading in the memories of men. At this time, in the land of France which you once loved so well, the heathen work ruin and destruction, and there is no leader to drive them away. Will you go back to help? Will you raise once again your banner in battle for a noble cause?"

Ogier's eyes gleamed with longing as memories of the forgotten past came thronging back to him; but he answered: "Choose thou for me; thou art the wisest. It is good to dwell here with thee in this peaceful place, but I count it also sweet to die in my old land if only in dying I may lose the memory of the hours I have spent in Avallon."

"Nay, speak not of dying," said Morgan le Fay. "So long as thou shalt bear on thy finger the ring I gave thee thy life is charmed. I bid thee go. See, I take from thy head the crown of gold. Henceforth thou shalt be

Ogier again; not, however, Ogier the old and dying man cast away upon the lodestone rock, but Ogier young, with all his manly strength."

Then by her magic art the fairy caused a deep sleep to fall upon Ogier, and he awoke from it to find himself back again in his beloved France, strong and powerful as in his prime. He still remembered vaguely something of Morgan le Fey and the land of Avallon, and the pleasant life he had lived there, but the memory was confused, like the memory of a dream, and each hour it grew less and less distinct. One thought, however, was very clear in his mind—that France had need of him, and that he must go to Paris to offer his services to the King.

Leaving the crowd behind, Ogier rode through the narrow streets until he came to an inn, where he rested for the night. In that hostelry he found a book wherein were written tales of the heroes of old, and, turning its pages idly, he came to the story of his own deeds, already dim, the truth mixed with many legends and lies.

The next day he rode toward the palace, to offer his services to the Queen, who, in the King's absence, was raising a great army to march against the invaders. He knew that stately building well, and when he rode into the square and saw the banners flying on its ancient turrets, and the gleaming armour of men-at-arms, his heart stirred with martial memories.

The Queen sat on a daïs, beneath a silken canopy, receiving the homage of the knights who came to take the oath of fealty. The great hall was full of them and their attendants; but they made way as Ogier passed, for not only was he big and strong and dangerous-looking, but something in his eyes struck them with awe. On her

part the Queen looked at him admiringly as he knelt down to kiss her hand.

“What is your name and title?” she asked, “and from what land do you come?”

“Lady,” answered Ogier, “it were easy to tell thee the land of my birth, but for a long time now I have dwelt in another country far away from here, and in very truth I forget its name. Men call me the Ancient Knight, and by that name you may know me.”

At this the Queen drew back her hand and stared at him wonderingly. “Well, Ancient Knight,” she said at length, “come back to me presently, and you shall be given a charge and a command to fight our enemies.”

Ogier bowed low and turned away, but before he had got half-way across the square a breathless page overtook him, and said that it was the Queen’s command, since she might be long delayed at the muster, that he should be taken to the palace and given hospitality until she returned. Nothing loth, Ogier followed the lad, though, indeed, he knew the way as well, or even better, than she. Through a well-remembered postern-gate he passed into the garden where he had walked on many a day in the bygone time, and thence into the guest-chamber, where the pictured face of Charlemagne gazed down at him from the wall. Beneath it he sat down, and for a time gave himself up to memories of the past. Strange to say, he remembered plainly all the incidents of his life on earth, even to the time when he was cast away on the islet; but after that everything seemed faint and dim.

Impatient and wearied of his thoughts at last, he arose and made his way into the garden again, where he lay

down on a grassy bank and, being wearied, soon fell asleep.

Presently, affairs of state being finished, the Queen, accompanied by one of her waiting-women, a wrinkled and withered old crone, came to the guest-chamber, and finding that Ogier had departed, went into the garden to seek him. Soon she came to where he lay, and stood looking down at him with a smile.

"The Ancient Knight!" she murmured. "I wonder why he calls himself by such a name, for he is still only a young man?"

"Softly, softly, my lady, you will waken him," said the old waiting-woman. "There is something strange about this man. Look, both his weapons and his clothes are of an olden fashion, and your squire tells me that he asked about men who have been dead these hundred years. God grant that he has not come to work us ill."

She bent down and gazed with curiosity at Ogier's outstretched hand, on the forefinger of which gleamed brightly the ring given him by the fairy. "Come and look at this ring," she said, "what strange markings it has." And before the Queen could say a word to prevent her she deftly drew the ring from Ogier's finger.

Then before the Queen's bewildered eyes a strange thing happened. A change came over Ogier as he lay sleeping. His golden hair turned white; his smooth and ruddy cheeks lost their colour, and became shrunken and wrinkled; his quiet breathing changed to a laboured struggle for breath. In the place of a fresh and healthy youth the Queen saw in a moment the form of an old, old man, with the hand of death already on him.

“What have you done? Oh! what have you done?” cried the Queen, weeping and wringing her hands.

But with a malicious and triumphant smile the old woman answered: “Now we know his secret! What need is there to weep, my lady? Can you not see that this ring gives the power of eternal youth? Take it quickly and put it on your finger, so that you may remain for ever young and lovely as you are to-day.”

The Queen took the ring, and for a time stood hesitating, looking down on Ogier, who now seemed to be at his last gasp. Then suddenly she bent down and placed it on his finger again.

Immediately Ogier’s laboured breathing ceased, and the flush came back to his cheeks. His hair changed from white to gold. In another minute he was as he had been before, and all that had passed seemed nothing but a hideous dream.

He opened his eyes and rose slowly to his feet, staring wonderingly at the Queen, who stood pale and trembling before him.

Forcing a smile, she said: “And so you can sleep, O Ancient Knight, while the heathen ravage this poor land of thine?”

“Pardon, Queen,” he answered. “Only tell me what work I am to do, and you will not find me backward in your service. And as for sleeping, I pray that I may never sleep again if I am to have such wretched dreams as those I have just awaked from.”

“Can dreams then trouble such a mighty head?” said the Queen, laughing. “Nay, a truce to jesting. Come with me to the council, where I promise you there is great need for any wisdom you can show. Something

tells me that you are come to be the salvation of my land and people. I will give you command of a band of valiant men to lead against the foe, and it may be that you may bring my husband back to me, for he is now in sore straits and beleaguered."

So saying, she turned and led the way towards the council chamber, and Ogier followed her.

But the old waiting-woman, left behind, gazed scornfully after them both. "Fool!" she muttered; "for the sake of sentiment to disdain a charm like that! When you are as old as I am you will know better, my lady. Never mind; the time may come when I can get that ring again, and if so, no power on earth shall make *me* give it up."

IV.

Of all the gallant deeds that Ogier did in France we have no space here to tell, but they are written in the old chronicle from which this tale takes its source. In the council chamber Ogier showed a wisdom and knowledge of war that won him the respect and confidence of the wisest men in the realm. One wing of the great army that had been raised was given him to command, and by forced marches he hurried towards Rouen, where the King's army was hard pressed. A grim battle took place, at the end of which the enemy were utterly routed, and fled in disorder from the field. But the King of France was slain by an arrow in the moment of victory.

The Queen wept bitterly when she heard the news, but she did not spare to thank the man who had proved the saviour of the land. As day followed day and her grief grew less, she felt something more than gratitude awake

in her heart. Love sprang to life there, and she was well content to know that it was the people's wish that Ogier should reign over them.

A year passed away. The last of the heathen hordes had been driven from the land, and on the coming May Ogier was to wed the Queen. By this time he had quite forgotten all that had happened in Avallon, and even the memory of his former life on earth was becoming dim.

At last came the eve of the wedding day, and when night fell Ogier retired to his chamber in the palace to sleep. As he lay on the bed he could hear the busy hammers of the workmen outside putting up the stands for the morrow's pageant. The distant tapping lulled him into sleepiness, and he closed his eyes.

Suddenly he heard a voice call: "Ogier! Ogier!" Wide awake in a moment, he raised himself on his elbow. "Who calls?" he cried. "I who lie upon this bed am Charles of France, and shall be King to-morrow. Who is this Ogier, and what deeds are his?"

A soft sigh, as of one grieved, sounded out of the gloom.

"Ogier was a famous name in days gone by," the voice said. "He it was who, led to Italy a helpless hostage, saved the King when the false Lombards deserted him. Ogier was faithful, and fearless, and invincible in battle. The great Charlemagne for a year besieged his castle in vain. By his might he saved France, and gained Denmark, and wore the crown of England. At Tyre he reigned, and at Babylon too, and when at last he disappeared he left a glorious name. All these things did Ogier, and all these things didst thou, for thou and Ogier are one. Remember now Avallon and Morgan le Fay!"

The voice ceased, and then slowly a form took shape

before Ogier's wondering eyes. A dim memory troubled his mind—he knew her—he knew her not! Oh, if he could only pierce this black cloud that dulled his thoughts!

The voice came again. "I am come to bring you home, for now you have done all that you were sent back to earth to do. See, I have brought you back the crown. Set it on your head, and full memory will return to you. But first rise up and put on all your royal robes, for we have far to go."

So Ogier arose and dressed himself in the glittering tunic which Charlemagne had worn, and took in his hand the ivory sceptre which Charlemagne had borne at his coronation. Then he buckled on the sword of state, and drew on the golden shoes, and, last of all, set the kingly crown upon his head.

But when he had done this, the fairy stepped forward and took off the royal crown, and, smiling, laid it on a cushion by the bed. "Lie there, O crown of Charlemagne!" she said. "Thou wert won by a mighty man as a symbol of worldly power and glory, but now Charlemagne is dust. A better crown have I—the symbol of a power and joy that shall last not for years, but for eternity."

And with that she placed upon Ogier's head the wondrous crown she had brought with her, and murmured, "Forget! Forget!" And at the touch of her the black cloud rolled away, and he knew her well, and a happy gleam came into his eyes.

"How came we here?" he asked. "Oh, I have dreamed of weary things—of death and fear and pain. Let us go quickly before the dream returns!"

So, taking him by the hand, she led him swiftly through

the palace and out at the gate, and it was early dawn. But at the threshold they paused and gave a last look at the sleeping city, with its grey roofs and spires gilded by the rising sun.

Another moment, and they were gone, but how I know not. Only this is sure, that though in after days France was often in need of a strong man to save her from shame and suffering, Ogier has never returned.

"You promise great things," the beggar answered; "and although I know that I were better dead, yet because I am afraid to die I will accept your offer and thank you for it. But first of all you must give me food and drink, for I am fainting with hunger."

Then Firuz led the way to a neighbouring hostelry, and sat the young man down to a meal such as he had not tasted for many a day. Afterwards he commanded that rich clothes should be brought for him, and a mule to ride on, and these being procured, the two, at the close of day, set out to leave the town.

As they passed through the crowded streets Bharam—for that was the name of the young man—being cheered with the food and wine, felt his spirits rise, and chatted and laughed light-heartedly. His companion, on the other hand, seemed still to be sunk in misery. He neither lifted his eyes nor spoke a single word. So they went on, through the gates of the city, out into the fields, past villages and farms, until at last every sign of man and tillage was left behind, and they entered the depths of a thick forest. Here for the first time Bharam's courage began to fail him. The night was so black and the wood was so full of mysterious noises that the young man's hair stood up on end, and he imagined he could see all kinds of horrid creatures lurking in the shadows. At length, however, the wood began to grow thinner. Now and again, between the branches overhead, Bharam caught sight of a stretch of moonlit sky, and before very long the forest was left behind.

Now the travellers entered a wide and open plain. Away in the distance the shape of a lofty watch-tower rose over a white building, the walls of which shone pale

in the moonlight. In the topmost chamber of the tower a light burned red like an angry star.

Towards the palace Firuz led the way, and having come to the gate, blew at the horn that hung there. A moment later the gate was opened by a man whose shrouded form was hardly seen in the shadows, and the two entered a garden overhung with lofty trees. Somewhere amid the glades a fountain played, and the musical murmur and splash of its waters sounded sweet in the moonlight. The air was full of the fragrance of flowers.

So they rode on beneath the trees, and came after a time to the main door of the palace, on which the plates of gold gleamed dully. Passing through, they entered a vast and dimly lighted hall, the walls of which were covered with hangings of figured silk. Without a glance either to right or left, Firuz went on, through the hall, and along a succession of narrow corridors, until at last he led the way into a small chamber, and showed his companion a bed made up beneath the window.

“Here you may rest,” said he, “and enjoy that blessing that is denied to the others of us here—peaceful sleep. To-morrow I will come to you again; for the present, good-night.”

Bharam longed to ask his companion to stay, for there were many things he wished to know about the strange place he had entered; but he curbed his curiosity, and threw himself down on the bed. He had so many things to think of and wonder about that he was quite sure he would not be able to get a wink of sleep. As a matter of fact, however, his eyes closed almost as soon as his head touched the pillow, and he knew nothing more until the morning.

It was broad daylight when he awoke, to see his companion of the previous night standing beside him, looking even more mournful and woe-begone than he had looked the day before, if that were possible. "Come," said he, "and see the house to which your fate has led you, and the people who live therein."

So Bharam rose and dressed, and followed his guide through passages pillared in white marble. High up on either side were many windows, through which could be seen the cool green of the trees that grew close up to the walls. At the end of one of the passages Firuz opened a door, and they came into a great hall, with a high, domed roof, and walls overlaid with beaten gold. One rapid glance Bharam cast around, and then started back in horror, for his eyes fell on a terrible sight. On a marble bench beside the wall sat six men, habited like his guide in dull grey garb. But the thing that caused Bharam's heart to turn cold within him was the awful expression of pain and hopeless misery that showed in their faces. Some hid their eyes with their hands as he looked at them; some cried aloud, making inarticulate sounds like the cries of a tortured animal; but one remained quite still, with wide, gaping mouth and nerveless limbs, and Bharam saw that he was dead.

As Bharam gazed in wonder, Firuz stepped forward and spoke to the woeful company. "Do not grieve, O my brothers," said he, "that another man has come to witness our misery. See, he is well and strong, and he will wait here to lay the last of us to rest when the end comes for which we pray. Even now I see that another soul has gone. Let us get ready and carry him to the place appointed. Be patient, brothers; the time is long

and hangs heavy on us, but soon for us, too, rest will come."

He turned to Bharam. "Will you indeed stay here, friend?" asked he. "Not as a servant, but as a master. We will be obedient to your commands, and each day do whatever task you will. Drive us like beasts; kill us if you wish; and with our last words we will thank you for the gift of death. Only one thing we will not do either for entreaties or commands, and that is tell you how we came here and why we rest in this pitiful condition. Will you accept the task? If so, this palace and all the treasures it contains shall be yours."

Bharam's first thought, when he heard these strange words, was one of delight that his miserable poverty was at last to come to an end. Then he looked at the woe-stricken faces of the men before him, and he felt a great pity for their misery rise within him. But he thought: "Perhaps, after all, this is only a mood of theirs—a mood that will pass, and they will be merry again in a day or two." And at that thought he suddenly made up his mind to accept the offer Firuz had made him, and there and then he issued his first command.

"Rise up," said he, "and take your fellow's body and lay it in its grave."

So, in perfect silence, the five living men took up the body of their companion and bore it forth, through many chambers and passages, out into a thick wood that lay beyond the garden. And passing through the wood by way of a narrow path, they came at last to a broad and swiftly flowing stream. Beyond it, on the further side, rose a steep grey cliff, in the base of which was a narrow iron door, and moored to the bank on the near

side was a boat. Bharam looked at the frowning cliff and the close-shut door in it, and he thought that he had seen all these things before in some half-remembered dream. And while he still stood there, gazing and wondering, the five men bent to their sad task, and laid their brother in the ground. Then, all silent, they retraced their steps homeward through the dark wood.

II.

For some months after this Bharam lived with his dreary companions within that splendid palace. He never could learn their story, although he burned with curiosity to know it. They went about their tasks day after day in a grim and moody silence, doing willingly all that he bade them. At intervals one after another of them died, and was laid to rest in the burying-place beyond the dark wood, and as death came to each of them the greater grew Bharam's longing to know what evil deed they could have committed which had brought such misery upon them. There was a great store of parchments in a chest in the palace, and Bharam read them eagerly to see whether he could find some clue to the mystery, but there was none. At last all of the five men were dead, and only old Firuz was left alive, and Bharam watched him eagerly, lest he, too, should die and leave the tale untold.

Then one day Firuz came to Bharam and said: "The end is near; soon you will have to lay me in the earth with my brothers; but before that happens I want to show you the secret path by which we came that night I brought you to this house. When I am dead you must

go to live in some fair city, but you can return here from time to time and take what treasures you will. Hasten now, and come with me, for the time is short, and I feel my strength ebbing fast."

So they went forth, and the old man showed Bhāram the secret way through the woods. But when he had done so and they were come to the edge of the forest, his strength failed him. "I can go no farther," he whispered. "Lay me down here to die." So Bharam laid him beneath the shadow of a great tree, and sat down by his side. And presently Firuz stirred, and said: "Do not carry me to the burying-place by the river. Hide my bones here, and go your way to the city; it will be the best thing for you if you never see that accursed house again."

At these words all Bharam's curiosity awoke anew within him, and he could not forbear from imploring the dying man to tell him his secret before the power of speech passed from him for ever.

"My will is weak," answered the old man, "and I can resist you no longer. Draw nearer to me, and if my feeble voice holds out so long I will tell you the tale you so much wish to know. Perhaps—who knows?—my dying words will serve to teach you wisdom. Open the pouch that hangs at my girdle and take out what you find therein."

Bharam opened the pouch, and drew out a little golden key.

"Ah! how your face flushes as you stare at it!" said Firuz. "Even so did mine when I saw it first, that summer morning long ago. . . . Draw nearer. . . . I am very faint, and a great blackness falls upon me."

Bharam raised the old man's head, and bent down to

catch the whispered words; but Firuz spoke no more. The next moment his head fell backward, and his friend knew that he was dead.

Then Bharam, all alone, made his way back to the palace, and set to work at once to gather up some of its treasures in gold and jewels, which he placed in a great sack ready to carry away. Having done so, he took out the little golden key, and gazed upon it, and he knew that it was the key of the iron door in the cliff side. There, no doubt, lay the hidden clue to all the mystery. Should he go now and unlock that door and learn what lay behind?

His face burned, his heart beat fast, and almost insensibly he began to walk through the garden towards the stream. Then suddenly realizing where he was going, a great fear seized upon him, and he turned and ran back to the palace without one backward look. Going to the stables, he saddled a mule, and placed the sack upon her. Then, taking a mattock and a spade, he returned to the place where he had left the body of his friend, and, having laid it in the earth, made his way towards the city.

Now Bharam was a rich man again, and could taste all the pleasures and luxury wealth can bring. He bought one of the most splendid mansions in the town, and invited there to feast and revel the many friends who flocked around him. For a time he lived merrily enough, yet he could never gain forgetfulness of the strange things that had happened, and as the days passed by he grew ever more moody and unhappy because of the longing he had to know what lay hidden behind the iron door.

At last one morning before dawn he took the key in his hand and went down to the stables. Many fine steeds were there, as well as the mule that had carried him and his treasures. This mule Bharam saddled and mounted, and, long before anybody else in the city was abroad, rode out through the gates into the quiet country beyond. Presently he reached the wood, and, being not quite sure of the path, he gave the mule her head in the hope that she would find the way. Sure enough, in a little while, the trees thinned, and, emerging from the forest, Bharam saw, across the open plain, the white watch-tower of the palace.

Eagerly he urged his patient beast to greater speed, and shortly afterwards came to the gate. There was no one to open the door for him now, so he lifted the rusted latch and passed in; but before he did so he took off the saddle and bridle from the mule and left her to wander where she willed. "If I come back alive from this adventure," he thought, "I shall have to find my way home as best I can."

Then he went on through the palace garden, now all tangled and overgrown with weeds, and passing through the great gilded doors that still hung wide open as he had left them, entered the palace. The silken hangings on the marble walls were tattered and rent. A snake glided, hissing, from beneath his feet, and in the great hall where he had first seen the mourners he saw the shining yellow eyes of a wolf that glared at him before it fled away.

Bharam had little heart to linger among all this ruin, and without delay he passed again into the garden and through the wood that led to the swift-flowing stream.

There lay the boat untouched, its sides blistered and grey with weed. He entered it, cast loose the mooring-rope, and rowed over to the narrow landing on the other side, just beneath the iron door. In another minute he stood before it, the key in his hand, his heart beating fast with excitement, his fingers trembling so that he could scarcely place the key within the lock. At last, however, he did so, and, almost before he willed it, the bolt slipped back. With a clang the iron door opened heavily inward, disclosing a black cavern, and a rush of cold wind fanned Bharam's face. With a last look backward he stepped within the cavern, and as he did so the door shut to again, leaving him quaking in the dark. He made a step forward, with outstretched hands groping for the way, but a sudden dizziness came upon him, and he fell, half-fainting, to the ground.

III.

How long Bharam lay in his swoon he never knew. Strange visions flitted before his eyes as he lay there—forms that came beckoning out of the dark and changed to shapelessness as he looked at them. Great wingless birds he saw, and beasts with wings, and stars that flamed and dwindled, and swirling seas that ebbed and flowed. Then the darkness closed round him like a shroud, and for a time he knew no more.

When once again he awoke to life the vision had vanished. A strange peace filled him, and he lay for a while in languid content, not troubling to open his eyes. Near by the song of a bird sounded sweet and shrill, and from the distance came the soft murmur of quiet waters.

Slowly he rose to his feet, and, still dazed with sleep, gazed around him.

The cave had vanished. Before him lay a beautiful stretch of land that sloped gently to a green ridge crowned with trees. Full in his face shone the rays of the westering sun, and its light was reflected from the waters of a tiny stream that flowed close to his feet.

At sight of that stream Bharam remembered that he had tasted neither food nor drink for many hours, so, bending down, he made a cup with his hands and drank of the cool, clear water. Then from his wallet he drew a small piece of bread, and sat down to make a frugal meal.

His hunger satisfied, he rose again, and set off to explore the country in which he found himself. Climbing the ridge, he descended the other side, and found a long grassy slope leading down to a beach of white sand that bordered an expanse of calm blue sea. The sun was now very low in the sky. Even as Bharam watched, its lower rim began to sink below the horizon and all the sky turned red and gold. Whether it was the glare of light that dazzled his eyes Bharam did not know, but he thought he could see, far out on the waters, a tiny black speck.

The sun sank lower and lower, and at last disappeared altogether. In a rush night came on, and the moon shone with a silvery light. Then Bharam saw that his eyes had not deceived him. The black speck was there upon the sea; it grew nearer, became bigger and bigger, and at last took shape as a ship drawing rapidly towards him. He sat down on the sand to wait for it, and before long he could hear the creaking of

the oars in the row-locks and the loud commands of the captain.

The ship came to rest some distance from the shore, and Bharam watched its dark hull rising and falling in the swell. Presently a little boat was lowered, and as it came on he saw that, besides its crew of rowers, it bore also two women, who, as soon as the keel touched land, sprang out and came towards him.

Greatly wondering, Bharam arose and stood waiting. Even in that doubtful light he could see that the women were young and very beautiful. Their loose hair was garlanded with flowers, and they were clothed in rich array. They smiled at Bharam, and one of them said in a low, sweet voice: "Fear not, you happy man, nor give way to any foolish doubts or fears. Come with us to where your fate awaits you—a fate happier than any you have dreamed."

Then, without another word, as if they knew well what his answer would be, the maidens turned and led the way to the boat, and Bharam followed them. Nor did they speak again on the way to the ship. Its black side reached at last, the boat was drawn up on the deck, Bharam stepped out, and the captain immediately gave orders to make sail.

All night the ship sailed on, and soon after dawn the next morning Bharam saw a faint line of land like a grey cloud-bank far off in the west. Soon the sun flashed on a wall of white cliffs, and an hour or two afterwards the vessel turned a headland and entered a sheltered bay into which a river flowed. Thither they steered, and cast anchor at last in a little haven at the river-mouth.

Now Bharam could look about him, and he found

much to wonder at. On a steep height overlooking the harbour stood a massive castle, and, dreaming in the quiet water at the foot of it, lay a little ship, its hull overlaid with plates of gold, all gay with silken sails and brightly-coloured awnings. Farther off, on the green slopes of the land, were many white tents, and the sun flashed on the steel of lance points and helms.

Then a boat was lowered, and Bharam got in, and was rowed towards the landing-place near the castle. As he approached closer he saw that between the tents, at the end of an open space carpeted with green turf, there was set a golden throne, and on the throne, crowned like a queen and decked as a bride, sat a beautiful maiden. Around her were gathered a company of damsels, dressed in rich attire like those two who had brought Bharam to the ship, and as the boat drew nearer to the shore the whole company of them broke out into a welcoming song. So sweet, so tender that music was, that, without knowing why, Bharam felt his eyes wet with tears, yet his heart was full of a joy greater than any he had known.

One of the maidens spoke to him in a low voice, bidding him draw near the throne, and he obeyed, walking like one in a dream and gazing on the maiden who sat there.

What words can describe her gracious beauty? As well might one try to measure the air, or weigh the wind, or portion out the light of the sun.

Amid the shouting of the people she stepped down from the throne and took him by the hand, and he heard her call him husband.

Then she led him through the lines of cheering soldiers to the golden ship, and they took their places on deck beneath a scarlet awning. The long oars were put out,

churning the green water into foam, and with her prow pointing up the river the little vessel moved swiftly away.

Bharam sat like a man in a dream, wondering at the strange things that had happened to him. The shores slipped by on either side in ever-changing beauty.

"Look, love," said she, "all this land is yours and mine. Will you not look upon your land?"

But Bharam did not move his eyes from her face, and answered: "When you shall walk upon the land among the blossoms, then shall I gaze upon it to see your feet."

Presently the river narrowed, and the country girls thronged the bank to see the Queen go by, singing sweet songs and casting fresh-plucked flowers upon the deck. "See," said the Queen, "the maidens come to wish us happiness."

But Bharam answered: "I will look on them when they kneel down to kiss the hem of your robe."

Now before them lay a fair city, with bridges spanning the stream, and white houses and palaces. The joyful sound of bells filled all the air, and from a great multitude of people that thronged all the ways came shout after shout of welcome. Then, as the high buildings between which they went cut off the light breeze, the shipmen furled the sail, and, propelled by its oars alone, the vessel moved slowly along until it came to rest at last by the side of a palace towering high above all the others. A golden gangway was lowered, covered with a silken carpet, and the King and Queen were home at last.

So Bharam won to a happiness such as he had never thought it possible mortal man could win, and for a time no clouds came to dim the sunshine of his content.

IV.

Two years passed away. Within his dream kingdom—if indeed a dream it were—Bharam reigned as King, and found great delight in his new dignity. At council and judgment-seat his word was law, and he exercised wisely his office. Summer waned to autumn, and autumn to winter, but his love for his wife made a constant summer in his heart that never faded. Day by day that love grew greater, and because of it he was the happiest man alive. About a year after his first coming into his kingdom a neighbouring people made war; but he led his armies against them, and, though defeated at first, he won at last a glorious victory, and returning a conqueror, gained not only love but honour from his subjects.

At the end of the second year the Queen one day came to him and said: “I am about to put a great trial upon you. All people, howsoever high they may be, must bow to the will of someone greater than themselves, and it is so with me. For a hundred days I must leave you alone, and go on an errand the purpose of which I must not tell you, nor yet at whose command I go. Do not seek to prevent me, or ask me to explain, but rest content until I return, and pay great heed to this one command I give before I go. For all the time I am away you must not enter the room where you and I have lived, for surely if you do so, henceforward we are dead to one another. Here is the key of the room; it can be in no safer hands than yours. Take it and guard it well.”

So saying the Queen bade her husband a tender farewell, and at once set out upon her mysterious journey.

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Left to himself, Bharam found the palace strangely empty. It seemed that with her going the light had gone out of his life, and he became a troubled, gloomy man. All sorts of doubts and fears began to enter his mind. He wondered what secret that room held, and whether if he entered it he would find the clue to all the strange things that had happened. Manfully he tried to put such thoughts from him, and by day, when his mind was occupied with other things, in part succeeded; but with the coming of each night his troubled thoughts returned to him, and a desire, at first faint, then stronger, and at last insistent, grew within him to enter the forbidden place.

After a time he took to loitering outside the closed door, fingering the key with fingers that itched to place it in the lock; and as he did so the memory came to him of how once before he had stood in a similar case, fingering another key, and ready to try another door. It was all very faint and dim, for in this new life he led his former existence seemed like a dream; but he remembered at least that in that old life, by opening a forbidden door, he had found the way to love and happiness.

So one day, in the early morning, Bharam set the key in the lock and thrust open the door. Having done so, he was at first afraid to enter, but glancing into the room and seeing nothing strange or unfamiliar there, he cast all fears aside, and went in boldly. There, in the grey light, the figured hangings showed as he had seen them last; the Queen's bed stood in the corner, and on a chair by the side of it lay a heap of her clothes as she had left them when she went away.

Bharam smiled as he glanced round the familiar room.

“In three days she will return,” thought he, “and we shall be the dearer to one another because of her long absence. I will tell her that I have broken her commands, and she will but smile and pity my weakness and forgive me.”

Then he turned to leave the chamber, but as he did so he caught sight of a cup standing on a table by the side of the bed. He had somehow missed it before, and his curiosity newly awakened, he returned to examine it more closely.

The cup was of gold, engraved with strange figures by a cunning workman, and by the side of it lay a tablet, on which words were written. Bharam breathed quickly “The secret—the secret at last!” he thought, and snatching up the tablet, he began to read. These were the words that were written there:

“O thou who, venturing much, hast gained so much,
 Drink of this cup, and be remembered
 When all are gone whose feet the green earth touch:
 Dull is the labouring world, nor holdeth such
 As think and yet are happy; then be bold,
 And things unthought of shall thine eyes behold.

“Yea, thou must drink, for if thou drinkest not
 Nor soundest all the depths of this hid thing,
 Think'st thou that these my words can be forgot,
 How close soever thou to love mayst cling,
 How much soever thou art still a king?
 Drink then, and take what thou hast fairly won,
 For make no doubt that thine old life is done.”

“True words,” thought Bharam, and, lifting the cup, he drained it to the dregs.

A sharp pain stabbed through him. For a moment he seemed to see his Queen standing before him, gazing at him with reproachful eyes that yet were full of undying

love. Then the vision faded, and there flitted before him the ghostly shapes of those six mournful men whom one by one he had seen laid to earth. A doleful wailing sounded in his ears, and a black mist rose before his eyes. With outstretched arms he staggered towards the door, but before he reached it his senses left him, and he fell headlong to the ground.

* * * * *

With a shuddering sigh he awoke out of a sea of unrest. A cold wind blew on his face, and he heard the sound of troubled waters. For a while he lay trembling and sick with fear, though he knew not why, and then opened his eyes.

He was lying on the ground by the side of the river, and around him the thin grass grew on a number of mounds he knew only too well. Before him loomed the steep grey cliff, with the iron door, fast closed, at its base. Slowly he rose to his feet and began to walk back between the trees, and a little wind sprang up and wailed among the branches. To him that doleful sighing seemed to express the utter misery of his fate, and he suddenly cried aloud: "Come back to me! Come back to me!"

But only the echoes answered him, and the mournful sound of the wind in the trees; and casting himself down on his face on the ground he wept till his eyes were dry of tears. Then, rising, he tottered on until he reached the palace, and found it roofless to the sky, the gardens overgrown as it were with the growth of years, and the green stain of decay upon its walls. And he made his way to the hall and the stone bench where in time past those others had sat, and remained there the night long, with sleepless eyes, thinking. . . .

And when the day came again, the new sun that rose brought no light for him, nor did he feel its fierce rays beating down upon his uncovered head. But after a time he departed to the city, and there for many days to come the people saw him on the quays gazing with lacklustre eyes on all the stir and bustle of the port, or in the streets on days of festival, passing by alone and unheeding.

And the good folk, seeing the hopeless misery of his face, stepped aside to avoid him, and the children hushed their merry laughter as he passed. And one and all knew him as "The man who will never laugh again."

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6

