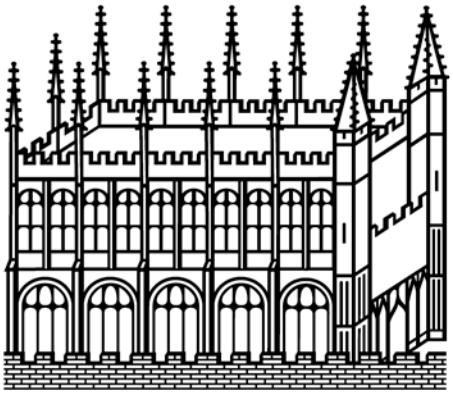

STARLIGHT STORIES

told to

BRIGHT EYES AND LISTENING EARS

STARLIGHT STORIES.

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Ruli makes the sacrifice.—*Page* 184.

Ruli makes the sacrifice. — *Page 183.*

STARLIGHT STORIES

TOLD TO

BRIGHT EYES AND LISTENING EARS

BY

FANNY LABLACHE.

With Illustrations by K. Greenaway.

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TO

'FRITZ,' 'MITZI,' AND 'LITTLE FANNY.'

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I.

PETRONEL AND PETRONILLA.

PETRONEL AND PETRONILLA.

THERE are as many poor people in Fairyland as in any other great country. It isn't all gold and silver and precious stones, as some fairy stories would lead one to believe; nor are all the dwelling-places palaces. And although there are plenty of good and wicked fairies in Fairyland, they have so much to do, and so many people to attend to,

that unless you particularly wish to attract their attention, it is quite possible for you to pass through a long life without ever having, to your knowledge, seen one of either sort.

For to attract their particular attention, you must take great pains to find, in the thickest parts of the woods, the places where they are accustomed to sleep at night; and go there before break of day, before they have raised their eyelids, and moisten these eyelids with the dew, culled from the hollow of a pink cowslip or a blue buttercup. And pink cowslips and blue buttercups are difficult things to find.

And, indeed, perhaps it is just as well that they are, for the bad fairies can make themselves look so wonderfully like the good fairies at times, that it is hard to know which is which, and the only sure way to tell them is by their deeds. And it would be a very dreadful thing to spend a whole week looking for a pink cowslip or a blue buttercup, and then go and wake up the wrong fairy after all!

Where Petronilla was born, nobody had ever seen a fairy. It was a poor enough place,—a little cottage built of clay, straw, and rough stones; a little garden, wherein Petronilla's mother worked from morning till night; and a few square yards of arid pasture land, railed in, where

two lean-looking goats passed their whole day in turning over the stones with their soft noses, and nibbling at the little tufts of short fresh grass that they found underneath. That was all.

Inside there were but very few necessaries, and no comforts at all. A bed for the mother and Petronilla, and one for Petronel, a three-legged stool, a table, a small mug for Petronilla's milk, a couple of spoons, a horn-handled knife or two. There was little else.

The time had been when things had prospered well with the little family, when there had been far less hard work to do, and more to eat. But that was before Petronilla's father died, just one year ago, when she was but a few weeks old; and when Petronilla's mother, in her bitter, absorbing grief, had forgotten to bake her little Twelfth-night offering of wheaten-flour cakes for the fairies, so that when the fairies went their rounds before daybreak, to gather together their different Twelfth-night gifts, and found no cakes at all, however humble, outside the little cottage door, they were grievously offended—not for the value of the cakes, but because they like to be remembered. And since that, nothing had gone well with the little household.

But Petronilla grew in beauty and in goodness, and very considerably in weight and in appetite; and so long as her mother could be awoke every morning by Pet-

ronilla's two fat little fists drumming on her cheeks—so long as she could feel Petronilla's fresh little mouth close to hers—so long as she could open her weary, aching eyes and see Petronilla's two wide-open blue ones looking straight at her,—she felt that each new day was a still more blessed day than the last, and that so long as there was Petronilla there was everything!

One sultry summer evening, while the two sat before the cottage door, playing together after work was over, there passed by a little old peasant woman knitting a stocking, and as she passed she looked at Petronilla and smiled.

'Good evening,' said Petronilla's mother, smiling too.

'Good evening,' said the old woman pleasantly. 'That's a nice child you've got there. Is it a boy or a girl?'

'It's a girl,' said Petronilla's mother, holding her baby a little closer to her breast; for she knew that all fairies, good or bad, are extremely fond of personating old women.

But Petronilla herself knew no fear. She was pleased with the old woman's kindly face, and held out her arms to her, and smiled her lovely baby smile.

'I should like to carry her for one minute, just to see how heavy she is. May I?' asked the old woman.

'Yes, surely,' said Petronilla's mother, getting up at once and putting Petronilla into the old woman's arms, with a beating heart nevertheless.

But fearless Petronilla held up her face to be kissed, and the old woman kissed her.

'I'm sure she is a good child,' said she kindly; 'and I wouldn't mind doing something for her, since you're so poor. I've had an eye on you for some time. How was it you forgot my cakes?'

Then Petronilla's mother knew that she saw a fairy before her, and fell on her knees.

'My husband was just dead, and I couldn't. Give me my baby—give me back my baby!'

'Don't be a goose! What will you take for her?'

'For Petronilla!' cried her mother in an agony. 'Nothing—nothing! What is there on earth that could buy my Petronilla?'

'Ta! ta! ta!' said the fairy. 'Don't excite yourself. Think quietly. Wouldn't you like a great farm-yard, full of fat brown horses and sleek red and white cows? Wouldn't you like several large fields full of golden, nodding corn, and great orchards full of ripe, juicy pears and apples? Just think!'

'No, no!' cried Petronilla's mother, stretching out her eager arms for her baby.

'No! Wouldn't you care to have a great substantial

brick house, full of beautiful furniture and fine snowy linen, and no end of servants to do your work for you? Wouldn't you like to be very, very rich, and ride in your carriage, and wear splendid clothes and valuable ornaments, and, who knows, perhaps marry some nobleman in course of time, and be a greater lady than the doctor's wife—wouldn't that tempt you?'

But Petronilla's mother crawled on her knees to where the fairy stood, and laid her trembling hands about the fairy's skirts, and tried hard to speak, but couldn't find words.

'What! you actually prefer Petronilla to all that luxury?' cried the fairy.

'A thousand million times!' cried Petronilla's mother.

'Then take her,' said the fairy crossly, and—plump, down came Petronilla into her mother's outstretched arms. She felt her all over, to make sure that the fairy hadn't crooked her little firm legs, or turned her two fat little arms into two plump sausages, or given her an extra nose on her face. No; Petronilla was still Petronilla, as straight and as lovely as a bunch of white lilies. And Petronilla's mother could only look up from where she knelt, and let the tears stream down her face. But the old fairy knew to a nicety what sort of tears they were; for she was the mother of fifteen as troublesome little elves as ever fairy was blessed with.

'I shan't make you any present,' said she. 'You forgot my cakes, and you won't give me Petronilla, although I should have brought her up very carefully, and should have married her to one of my own boys by and by. So you and your ragged little home may stay as you are! But I will give Petronilla something. I will put a star on her forehead! The older she grows and the better she behaves, the brighter it will burn. And although it will not be visible to mortal eyes, few people will come within reach of its pure light without feeling something the better for it. For the gift that I give to Petronilla is, that she may do good to others.'

'But how will that benefit Petronilla herself?' cried her mother.

'Petronilla shall taste of joys that no mere selfish pleasures could afford her. The star won't prevent trouble. It won't make her richer or poorer than she makes herself. It won't give her the things she sets her heart upon. But it will add lustre to every joy that it may be hers to experience, and it will lessen the pain of every sorrow that it may be hers to endure. More than that; at the hour of Petronilla's death, if she has led a blameless life, the star on her forehead will shine brighter than ever! It is then that it will be visible to mortal eyes—only that once during her life-time; and very blessed will be those who look upon

it. Only she must remember to keep the star shining brightly.'

Petronilla's mother began to murmur her thanks, but the fairy was gone! There wasn't the least bit of her old black cloak to be seen up and down the mountain-side, as far as eye could see. There was the winding pathway, the great grey, lichen-covered rocks, the tall dark pine-trees here and there, and the little stunted bushes everywhere,—but no old woman anywhere. And on Petronilla's unconscious little forehead, unseen by even her mother's keen eyes, there shone the tiniest, twinklingest baby star that could possibly be imagined.

Many years afterwards, when Petronilla by standing on tip-toe could just make herself as tall as her mother, her mother died, and Petronilla was left alone in the world. Quite alone; for Petronel had not been seen at the cottage for many long years. He had grown tired of the humble little home that was so dear to his mother and his sister, and he had shouldered his knapsack, had taken all the money that his mother could spare him, and had gone his ways, 'in search of fortune!' But at that his mother wept sorely, and shook her head. The old proverb of 'A rolling stone gathers no moss' holds as good in Fairyland as in our own country; and Petronel was a rolling stone.

At the time that Petronilla was beginning her lonely life,—too poor to fear for the safety of her little possessions; too good to be afraid of the solitude or of the long dark nights; too contented to wish for anything more than that her goat's cheese and fresh eggs should fetch a fair, honest price at market on market days,—there was a great stir at court in her country. The young king had called a council, and had explained to them, that as it was the particular and long ungratified wish of his royal mother, his ministers, and his people, that he should marry, he had at length resolved upon selecting a suitable bride, and that—

Here the young king was interrupted by such prolonged applause, such evident marks of satisfaction, that he had paused deeply gratified, and had warmly thanked the council for their enthusiastic reception of his little announcement.

When silence was restored, he proceeded to say that he had, as he said before, resolved upon selecting a bride, and that, in fact, he had already selected one!

Here the joy of the council was about to know no bounds, when the king, enjoining silence by a gesture at once graceful and dignified, continued as follows:—

'Last night I dreamt a dream,' said he timidly; 'and in that dream I saw a young girl, very much more beautiful, and possessing far more attractive manners,

than any of the thirty-seven princesses that you have presented to me. If I cannot find that young girl and make her my queen, I think, if you please, that I would rather not have any queen at all. That is all I had to say; so you will oblige me by looking for her. Good morning, gentlemen.'

Whereupon the king rose, and quietly left the room. It had often been said that the king was of a somewhat obstinate disposition. Nothing could have exceeded his obstinacy on this occasion.

Nothing whatever respecting his promised marriage and the mythical dream-maiden was to be learnt from his royal and obstinate lips. When he had told them how extremely lovely she was, and that she lived on a bleak, bare mountain-side, and was feeding a couple of goats out of her apron when he saw her, he thought he had said enough, and left to other heads and legs the task of looking for her and finding her. Indeed, the truth was that the king himself knew no more; and perhaps, too, he himself was one of the very first to doubt her actual existence, and to despair of success attending their searches.

For many months there was a continuous stream of country girls coming to and from the palace. Nor were they particular as to their being goat-girls only. There

were dairy-girls, poultry-girls, cow-girls, butter-and-cheese-girls, laundry-girls, garden-girls, all kinds of girls, in fact;—some pretty, some plain, some smiling; some red and pleased, others pale and frightened; some short, some tall, some fat, some thin; blue eyes, black, grey, brown, hazel, and even green eyes were to be found among the number; some tidy and gentle, others slovenly and bold-faced.

But as they, each one separately, passed from the great antechamber, where they waited in twos, threes, and dozens, into the royal presence, the young king would just lift his weary head from the cushions on which he reclined, and say languidly and despairingly,—

'Oh dear, no; nothing like her! Give them all handsome presents, and let them go.'

Things were getting quite serious. This determined obstinacy on the part of the young king was making not only himself and the queen-mother, but every one else in the royal palace, feel quite uncomfortable, from the Chief Lord of the Gold Candlestick, down to the smallest and grimiest of the little scullery-maids in the royal kitchen.

But one day, just after the Gold Candlestick had whispered in the king's ear,—

'Your Majesty has already reviewed no fewer than twelve hundred goat, poultry, butter-and-cheese, and

flower girls. There cannot be many more for your Majesty to see. Would it not be better, then, if your Majesty has resolved to contract this *mesalliance*, to select'—

'What!' cried the king loudly, quite forgetting to be languid and overcome; 'do you mean to insinuate, Candlestick, that I don't know what I'm talking about?'

Well, just while this conversation was taking place, there was a stir — courtiers standing on tip-toe and pressing forward—voices murmuring—

'Oh, how pretty she is!' 'Oh, there must surely be the lovely goat-girl at last!'

Petronilla, of course! She came in, onwards through the corridor, with the light, graceful tread of a young gazelle, and just as timidly; her eyes were rimmed round with red, for Petronilla had not come hither by her own wish, but by force; and her pale, serious face told of the trouble and distress that lay like lead at her heart. Never had the star on her forehead shone brighter than then; and though not one of the gay, thoughtless throng around her could see it for themselves, still, as she passed by them one by one, and its pure, soft light fell across them, so one by one they ceased to wonder at her coarse grey cotton clothes, and her stout shoes, and her hard-working, rough little hands; and felt that truly there were other things worth having in this great

world besides wealth and power, and that it might be a good thing after all to be only a little goat-girl such as she was.

As for the king, the moment he saw her standing in the doorway, he jumped up from among his cushions with a great cry of delight, and running across the room, bent the royal knee before her, and thanked her aloud, with all his heart, for her great goodness in coming so far; and, rising from his knees, he lifted his own crown from his head and placed it on hers. And after that there was scarcely need for him to turn towards all the courtiers, and say—

'This is at last the very goat-girl of my dream!'

Of course every one had guessed that before he spoke; and half-a-dozen of them had already scampered off to the queen-mother's rooms with the joyful news, and some had torn down to the kitchens to rouse the cooks.

'Wake up! wake up! Serve up the royal dinner. It is thought likely that the king will be able to manage the wing of a fowl.'

Up-stairs, Petronilla stood distressed and confused.

'May I go back home now, please?' said she gently. 'It's getting very late, and the goats will be looking for me.'

'Why, child,' cried the Gold Candlestick, 'you are never going home any more now; the king would not allow it.'

'I have chosen you to be my queen,' said the young king, smiling.

But Petronilla looked up at them all with wondering eyes.

'Oh no!' cried she, shaking her head; 'I would rather not!'

'What!' cried the Gold Candlestick and all the courtiers loudly, startled right out of all etiquette; and even the young king looked up in faint surprise. This was certainly an unlooked-for hitch in the royal arrangements, and king and courtiers both looked inquiringly at each other, and seemed neither to know what to say or what to think.

'Why, the good girl must be a perfect idiot!' said the Gold Candlestick-in-waiting.

'No,' said Petronilla gently; 'I don't think I am an idiot. I make some of the very best goat's cheese in the market, and I'm handy with my needle. But, if you please, I am only a goat-girl, and I am not at all fit to live in such a wonderful palace as this. Nor do I think that the great king would care to have me always with him; and I know that I should always be wishing to go back to my dear goats. The great king will think once

more, perhaps, and then he will forgive my having spoken as I feel now.'

'She is right. She won't do; she is an idiot!' cried the Gold Candlestick.

'But, Candlestick,' said the king, speaking rather timidly, 'I like what she says very much. Every word she utters convinces me more and more that she is just the sort of queen I should like;' and turning to Petronilla, he added, 'You shall have as many goats as you please, all with gold collars and bells round their throats; and I'll have a mountain built directly for you in the rose garden, or wherever else you please. What is your name?'

'Petronilla,' said she. 'Thank you for thinking of the goats, but I cannot leave my little home. I must wait there for Petronel;' and at the last few words her voice sank to a whisper.

'Who is Petronel?' asked the king and the Gold Candlestick almost simultaneously.

'Petronel is my brother.'

'Candlestick,' said the king, 'have the goodness to give the necessary orders. We will have Petronel here in less than no time, dear Petronilla, and'—

But Petronilla shook her head.

'Petronel is not to be found,' said she. 'Do you think we could have rested quietly, any of us, if he were

to be found by looking for him? No. The wicked fairies have laid fast hold of him, and I fear that he will never come back to me again. But I will hope until I die, and I will wait where my dear mother herself waited so long and so patiently, so that, if Petronel ever does come back, he may not be turned away by the sight of strange faces. It is getting very late; may I not go home now?'

'No,' said the king. 'This is how we will manage. Every day you and I will go and spend the whole day at the cottage.'

'But,' objected Petronilla, 'suppose Petronel should just happen to return before we arrived, or after we had left.'

'Very well. Then you shall live there entirely, Petronilla, and I will come and see you every day. There will be two courts, that's all.'

'Then I should not be doing my duty to you,' said Petronilla.

'In that case, let us both go and live there entirely.'

Petronilla smiled, though there was much of sadness in her smile.

'Then you would not be doing your duty to your people. Besides, Petronel would not recognise me in my fine dresses. He would look, and stop short, and wonder, and run away again. The great king must

surely see that his wish is a foolish one,' added she, turning to the Gold Candlestick-in-waiting.

Everybody quite agreed with Petronilla in thinking that the king's wish was a foolish one, but only Petronilla had had the courage to say so. There was an embarrassing silence for a few minutes; but Petronilla soon broke it.

'May I not go home now?' said she in a sweet, steady voice. 'I was brought here against my will, and detained until late; and the mountain road is lonely after dark. If it please the king, I will return to my goats.'

'It does not please me,' said the king.

'Am I prisoner, then?' asked Petronilla, flushing crimson.

'Nobody, no, not even I myself,' said the Gold Candlestick-in-waiting, 'can stir from the palace grounds contrary to the wish of his Luminous Effulgency the king. If the king says, "Go," out you must go. If he says, "Stay," in you must stay.'

'Nay,' said Petronilla, speaking very gently but with such exceeding composure and dignity that the Gold Candlestick was obliged to lower his bold eyes before hers, 'I have always been taught to believe that the king's people were a free people.'

The Gold Candlestick-in-waiting was about to speak, but the king signed to him to be silent.

'And are they not?' asked he.

'I think not,' answered Petronilla, looking frankly up now and smiling; for the king's voice was kindly.

'It is a cruel thing to say,' said the king.

'Then I will not say it,' said Petronilla.

'But you will think it, dear Petronilla, and that is worse. And yet you must think it if you will, for I feel that I cannot let you go. Believe me, I only wish for your good. Surely it is no great hardship to become queen of a great country and a great people. When you are a little less startled, you will feel glad that I persisted.'

'I do not think so,' said Petronilla, after a slight pause. 'But you are the king, and I must obey. I will be your queen, therefore, and I will try very hard to do my duty; but I shall not be happy, for my heart will be always with Petronel and my goats in my own little home. Nor, indeed, will your people be able henceforth to call themselves a free people, since their very queen herself will be amongst the first of the prisoners.'

'Petronilla!' cried the king, very much agitated, 'you are free!'

And so saying, he went to the door and threw it wide open. Seeing this, the others immediately gave way—a little passage was formed in their very midst. The king stood beside the doorway, pale and silent. Pet-

ronilla was indeed quite free; but she did not move. She stood perfectly still, undecided and troubled, and the hot tears rushed into her eyes.

'I did not mean to be rude or ungrateful,' said she.

'You are neither,' said the king. 'You are wise and just. I know of no greater ornaments in a queen's crown. Good-bye, Petronilla.'

But when Petronilla went and knelt down before him, and would fain have kissed the royal hand, he turned away with a sigh.

'When Petronel returns, you will come back to us, Petronilla?' said he. 'It is our especial wish'—

'If Petronel returns, I will come back,' said Petronilla softly. 'It will be my own wish also.'

And so Petronilla went back to her clay cottage and her flock of goats, with a thankful and a peaceful heart. And at last she had her reward. Autumn had passed and winter had nearly gone, and when the first green leaves were beginning to show their little timid heads between the dark-brown branches, Petronel came home. But oh, what a different Petronel! So worn and weary looking; covered with nothing but dirty rags; rough-haired, red-eyed, and pale-faced; and with thin, white fingers, that clutched eagerly at startled little Petronilla's skirts; and a faint husky voice, that could just say, 'Petronilla! don't you know me, then? it's Petronel!'—

and that was all. Know him! Ah yes, yes, indeed! her arms and her heart were ready—had been ready for many a long, patient year; and all that Petronel had to do was to come back to them, without questions, answers, or reproaches.

For a long time Petronel lay very ill, and during that time Petronilla never went near the palace, anxious as she was to keep her promise to the king; not because Petronel couldn't spare her, or because she was afraid to be out of his sight for so long, for he was far too weak and weary to do anything but lie still and sleep; and as for running away again, had he even wished to do so, he couldn't have got any farther than the cottage door. There he must surely have fallen flat on his helpless back, and have stayed there until his sister came home to help him up again. No! it was because Petronilla could not bear that the king should see her brother in his present ragged, poor-looking condition; and she was afraid, too, lest the king himself should see fit to come to the little cottage, if he knew that Petronel had returned; and she feared lest the sight of so much splendour should scare him, for Petronel had always been like a shy wild bird. So she waited till he was quite strong and well again. And then she cut his long tangled hair, and combed it carefully; got him out their dead father's best suit of clothes, and brought them to

him, with a bowl of fresh hot goat's milk, and a large oaten cake, and said,—

'Petronel, when you have finished that, get up and dress yourself nicely, and we will go and see the king and the queen-mother.'

Petronel was delighted at the mere idea of seeing the inside of the palace, and made all possible haste; and before very long he was ready, and off they set, hand in hand, in their Sunday best. For Petronilla's heart was as light as a feather now, and she felt that she could at last wear the little light-blue silk hood, that the village doctor's wife had once given her, without feeling too much dressed. As they approached the palace gates, great was their surprise to see the sudden excitement of the sentinels. Such waving of swords, such shouting, such a racket, indeed, that two grave old councillors who were walking together in the royal courtyard, seriously discussing matters of the deepest moment, turned round their venerable heads to see what the matter could be.

'Why, dear me!' cried they both together. 'It's the little goat-girl!'

And up they caught their long velvet robes about their portly persons before you could say three threes, and set off as hard as they could pelt back to the palace door, and up the king's private staircase, panting and

gasping as they went, each one eager to be *the* one to carry him the welcome news, and crying out,—

'Ge' outh' way! ge' outh' way, everybody! Wher' s' king? wher' s' king?'

And seeing how they ran, Petronilla and Petronel ran too.

'Why, what is the matter?' cried she, running up against the Gold Candlestick-in-waiting, who had seen her arrive from an upper window, and had come rushing down-stairs to meet her.

'Matter!' cried he fiercely. 'Where have you been all this long while, I should just like to know? You've nearly killed his High and Mighty Everythingness. Isn't that matter enough? He hasn't eaten more than a teaspoonful or two of nightingale-soup since you were here last.'

The king was indeed looking very much as if his appetite had not been quite what it should be of late. Indeed, so pale and thin-looking had he become, that Petronilla's heart was filled with remorse, and her eyes with tears; and she threw herself on her knees and implored his pardon for having behaved in so undutiful and disloyal a manner. But the king raised her from the ground with much tenderness, and assured her that since she had really once more come to the palace, and as he perceived she had not totally forgotten him after all,

he would do his utmost to get red and fat again just to please her.

And once more did several of the gentlemen-in-waiting scamper away to the queen-mother's apartments with the joyful news, and once more several eager pairs of legs tore down the royal staircase, and shouted with loud voices down the kitchen-stairs.

'Make haste, Petit Paté! make haste, Soufflé!* Send up the royal dinner! It is just possible that his Radiant Muchness may be able to swallow a cupful of butterfly broth.'

As for Petronel, the king took off his gold collar, and his jewelled rings, and his beautiful two-edged sword, and his rich velvet cloak embroidered in gold and silver, studded with pearls, and clasped with a diamond clasp, and gave them all to him.

And Petronel sat open-mouthed, and took them, never even saying so much as 'Thank you' for them, so confused was he.

And that ceremony being accomplished, and Petronel thus made welcome, and received as the king's good friend and brother, the king turned to Petronilla, to whom, with delicate tact, he had refrained from offering anything at all.

* Famous men-cooks of the time.

'Petronilla,' said he, 'now that you have your brother, will you be my queen? Let me take you to the queen-mother, and she will tell you how welcome you are.'

'Not so soon,' said Petronilla, shaking her head. 'I must first see how dear Petronel goes on here. For if he should ever wish to go away again, I must go too this time.'

'As if I should ever want to leave this place!' said Petronel, half-laughing half-indignant, and patted her cheek condescendingly.

'You say so now; but when the novelty of all this is worn off, perhaps you may wish to leave, Petronel.'

'A nice wicked wretch you make me out!' cried Petronel, reddening.

'No, dear Petronel; not that, indeed. You will do as you please, and go where you please. I only wish to go with you.'

'You may do that,' cried Petronel, warmly enough. 'I am worth nothing without you, dear Petronilla.'

'And, indeed, neither am I!' said the king. 'So I do entreat you, Petronel, to try to content yourself with our court life, at least until Petronilla consents to become my wife. For then I shall not be at all afraid of her leaving me, for it will be the queen's first duty to stay with the king, and we know how dutiful Petronilla is.'

So it was settled that in six months' time, if Petronel

still seemed happy and content, and likely to live quietly at the palace, that the royal wedding should take place.

But alas! grievous as it is to write it, Petronel's good behaviour was of short duration. For a short while the novelty of wearing splendid apparel and valuable jewels, and of eating dainty meals out of costly golden plates, was certainly amusing enough; and certainly the splendid horses and dogs in the royal stables, which had been all placed at his disposal, were a source of great pleasure, at first. But when he found that there was not one single young man at court, nobleman or varlet, no, not even the king himself, who could ride the fierce high-bred horses as madly and recklessly as he did; not one who could run as fast, or as far, and as long as he did; not one who could take so sure an aim with gun, arrow, or pistol as he did; not one who could leap, swim, wield an oar, or climb a tree as well as he did,—why, then, he soon got tired of it all, and complained to Petronilla.

'They are a set of spoilt girls, Petronilla,' he would say with a toss of his curly black locks.

'Now when I was living among the black gipsies (who taught me to do all these things so well)—now that was a jolly life for you! We never knew from one minute to the other what was going to happen; and here we know exactly what is going to

happen for weeks interminable! That's the great pity of this life.'

'But, Petronel,' said his sister anxiously, 'I thought the black gipsies were wicked fairies.'

'Well—perhaps; but what of that? They were all my very good friends. They won't harm you if you don't irritate them, you know.'

'But, Petronel, if they were your very good friends, why were you in such a horrible state when you came home to me? Don't they take better care of their friends than that?'

'Well, we don't think so much of fine clothes in the Dark Forest as you do here,' admitted he with a laugh. 'And besides that, they didn't wish me to come home to you—I just slipped away as I could. I was getting tired of the forest, I suppose. But they don't care for their relations. They couldn't understand that I wanted to see you.'

'Oh, how dreadful!' cried Petronilla, with clasped hands.

'Perhaps—yes. But it was pleasant,' said the boy, sighing. 'What nights we used to have, sitting twenty or thirty of us round a great pine-wood fire, that took the blaze right out of the stars overhead, I can tell you! And that's when we would drink great flaming bowls full of red-hot wine and spirits, and hear all

the wild, wonderful stories they had to tell. Some of them might just have come from the north, and had been up to fine lively games there,—pushing the icebergs right in the very way of the vessels—on purpose, you know. Tack and turn as they might, there would be a great mass of steel-blue ice right ahead of them. The steersman would be at his wit's end to know how to steer; but the captain might shout till his voice cracked, and stamp his feet till the fur fell off his boots, it was of no use. They would do their very best to steer wide of the great jagged wall in front of them. Those imps would be behind it, you know, pushing it with all their might and main, laughing fit to kill themselves. Only their laughter was so like the shrill whistle of the wind among the sails, that the sailors themselves if they saw them would only take them for some sort of seals or bears; and slap, slap—splash, splash the vessel would toil through the dark green water till it met the ice with a crash and a wrench, and a horrible shiver all over, and then, of course'—

'And then?' asked Petronilla breathlessly.

'Well,' said Petronel with a laugh, 'they might go down—or they mightn't! But they were not all cold stories like that. Some of them had been to the south. Oh, what funny tales they'd tell of the great bags full

of blinding fine sand, that they would shake right in the faces of travellers in the deserts, and nearly choke them! and of how they would whisper in their ears, when they were lying worn out and fast asleep on the ground beside their camels, fifty miles or more away from the nearest well, and would make them dream of fountains, and clear, rippling streams, and cool, shady groves of trees! And up they would start with a half-stifled cry, and hot, parched throats and lips! Oh, they are certainly sad, wild fellows some of them, but they made one very nearly die of laughter sometimes with their pranks and tales.'

But Petronilla didn't laugh. Her eyes were brimful of tears, and her young heart was heavy. Alas, alas! that Petronel should be so wicked, and yet so dear!

The evening before the royal wedding, there was to be a grand ball at the palace, at which Petronilla was to be presented by the king and queen-mother to the court, the chief ministers, and to the deputies of the people, as their future queen. It was enough to turn any young girl's head; and it is not to be wondered at, that for the whole of that confusing day Petronilla forgot even Petronel.

The time had come for her to be dressed in her royal robes of stiff golden stuff, and soft, clinging lace; and row after row, and bracelet after bracelet, of rare jewels, lay

on her toilet-table before her, waiting to be put on. It was getting late,—very late for Petronilla, who had been accustomed to go to bed with the chickens, and get up with the larks. The great palace clock was, in fact, striking nine o'clock, when a lady-in-waiting attached to the queen-mother's household, and the two dressers appointed for Petronilla, waited on the little goat-girl in her own room to inquire if she would be pleased to begin dressing.

Petronilla thanked them and said yes, but might she first say her prayers? She was accustomed to say them at this time. The lady-in-waiting begged that when Petronilla was ready to receive her she would strike the little gong that lay on the toilet-table. Then, curtseying profoundly, she withdrew with the two dressers to the antechamber.

Petronilla fell on her knees at her open window, turning away her eyes from all new-found splendour to fix them on the lovely distant stars, not one whit lovelier seen from the palace windows than from her own little cottage doorway in the mountains. And then, and only then, the thought of Petronel rushed like a torrent back into her heart, and filled it full to overflowing with love, and fear, and pity. And his name rose trembling to her lips.

'Petronel!' Why, she had forgotten him! She had

not seen him all that long day through. Had he wanted her? Had he missed her? Where was Petronel, by the bye? Oh, how thoughtless, how selfish she had been! And then, as if in answer to her question, there came the sound of a far-off voice across the moonlit gardens, faint but distinct, like the distant murmuring of the sea,—

'Petronilla! Petronilla! Petronilla! Farewell!'

Petronilla sprang to her feet. Petronel's voice! Petronel calling her! She stretched out her arms to where the sound came from, and called to him loudly and earnestly,—

'Petronel! Where are you? I am here, dear little brother! Here!'

No answer. The tall, sleepy trees nodded together in the moonlight. The glittering ripples on the lake idly rippled themselves away to nothing on the moss-covered banks. The faithful sunflowers were slowly, silently turning their golden faces from west to east, in readiness to greet to-morrow's rising sun. All was silence and repose. But as Petronilla with a fast-beating heart looked and listened, she fancied she could hear again and again, but still farther away each time, still more faintly, Petronel's voice calling to her,—

'Petronilla! Petronilla! Petronilla! Farewell!'

She forgot all else—king, queen, palace, ball, and wedding. Out of the room she ran by a little side-door,

and down a narrow staircase that led into the garden. From the garden she reached the great courtyard, and crossed it, nobody imagining for a moment that the young girl in the plain stuff dress, that hurried so swiftly past them, was Petronilla, their queen-elect. Everybody was busy with something or somebody else. Nobody asked any questions but the sentinel at the palace gates, and all he said was—

'Snakes!'

'Tea leaves!' answered Petronilla, and he let her pass.

Those were the pass-words for the day, and of course Petronilla knew them. She asked the sentinel if he had seen Petronel lately.

'He passed out about two hours ago. I had just come on guard.'

'Was he alone?'

'No; there were two dark, ill-looking men waiting for him with a third horse, and they all rode off together.'

'Which way did they go?'

'I heard one of them say, "Now for liberty and the Dark Forest!"'

Petronilla ran on as if in a dream, her eyes seeing none of the wondering passers-by, her legs knowing no fatigue. She had but one thought, to save Petronel from the wicked fairies. Oh, if she could only reach him in time to throw her arms round his neck, to beg him to

forgive her for having forgotten him for so long, to entreat him to return to the little mountain home again, where she would spend her life and her strength in endeavouring to make everything pleasant and comfortable for him! Oh, if she could only make him understand how little she cared for riches, or power, or for her own comforts, provided that he were well, and provided he would look, and speak, and feel once more like little baby Petronel—provided he would but give up his wicked friends and his wicked ways! She ran, ah! almost as fast as she thought; and very shortly she had left the sleeping town behind her. The first place she stopped at was a little country roadside inn. The door was still open, and there was a bright red light behind both door and windows, late as it was. So Petronilla ran in, little caring for what they thought of her crumpled dress, and her lovely disordered hair, and her agitated voice and manner.

'There had been a good many travellers passing that way since early morning,' was the answer to her eager inquiries.

'Did she mean, perhaps, three ill-looking scampish fellows on fiery black horses,—the youngest a good-looking lad with curly hair and flashing dark eyes?'

'Yes, yes; that was Petronel! Well?'

'Oh, if you're after them, and on foot too, you'd better

borrow a pair or so more legs. They must be in the Dark Forest by this time, for they went like the wind. Nor did they stay here very long. Good riddance to them! That was about three hours ago.'

Petronilla scarcely waited to thank them. Onward she ran towards the Dark Forest. A mile or so farther down the road she met an old woman with a bundle of faggots over her back, singing as she went.

'Have you seen my brother Petronel?' asked Petronilla, stopping her.

'Nay,' said the old woman, smiling and shaking her head, 'I've seen no kith or kin of yours, my little lambkin! There was a wicked lad on a fierce black horse, who nearly knocked this wood off my back as he passed, and rode off laughing.'

'Which way was he going?' inquired his sister anxiously.

'Towards the Dark Forest, dear child! But have nothing to do with him! Well, if you must know, the road is straight on—you can't miss it.'

Poor Petronilla! The drops of red blood were already beginning to trickle through her little thin shoes as she ran. How weary she was her own soul knew not! But she *was* weary, weary almost unto death.

She ran on all through the dark night hours. It was summer then, and day broke early. She took no rest,

however. On she ran, with a courage and an energy that knew no failing. By and by, when the road narrowed, and the trees grew so close together, and all before her looked so dark and so gloomy that she knew she must at last be drawing near to the dreaded Dark Forest, she met a little old man whistling cheerily as he walked.

'Has Petronel passed this way? — have you met Petronel?' inquired Petronilla, without offering to explain who and what like Petronel might be. For her mind was so full of him, that it seemed to her as if everybody else's mind must be full of him also.

'Petronel!' cried the little man, stopping short at once, and bringing down his hand on his knee with a joyous slap. 'To be sure! That was the name! I remember it now. How I have been hunting in my mind for that name! For look you, my girl, a bargain's a bargain all the world over, and I'd promised to— Yes, I saw him. He asked me the road to the river, and I told him, and he gave me a fat golden piece for my pains, and said he, "Pray for Petronel!"'

'Was he alone?'

'Yes.'

'Which way is it to the river?'

'You're not so generous as Petronel,' said the old man, grumbling a bit.

Petronilla gave him the gold ear-rings that the queen-mother had given her.

'When you reach the cross roads, take the one to the left,' said the old man; 'you will presently get to a great cluster of fir-trees. Count to the twenty-seventh. About twenty paces behind it you will find a narrow, winding pathway. It leads to the very water's edge.'

'Thank you,' said Petronilla, running off again. 'Don't forget to pray for Petronel.'

The road was easy enough to find. Oh, how frightened would Petronilla have been at any other time, to leave the friendly, bright moonlight, and to plunge into the utter, terrible darkness behind those gloomy fir-trees! How startled she would have been at the bats that flew almost in her very face! How terrified at the very sound of her own rapid footsteps on the fallen dry leaves and branches! But now she feared nothing! If only she were in time to see Petronel before he went any farther into the depths of the Fairy Forest—where Petronilla's weary little legs could never carry her; where not even the influence of such deep, holy love as Petronilla's could ever reach him; where he would be at the mercy for ever and ever of the wicked fairies!

And then—just as she was beginning to think to herself that her labour had been all in vain, and that she

should never see Petronel again—she found him! There before her lay the broad, black river, gliding sullenly and noiselessly between the tall, thick trees. There were the great, rank rushes, and the foul water-weeds. There were the great slimy rocks; and there, face downwards on the grass, close to the water's edge, in silent horror and despair lay Petronel! And it was then, only then, that Petronilla knew how utterly weary she was, and how impossible it would have been to have struggled on any farther. She could now but just totter up to where he lay, and kneel down beside him, and whisper his name. And he sprang to his feet, as though the sound of her gentle voice had been like the shout of a whole army.

'Petronilla!' cried he; 'little Petronilla, *here!*' Oh how he flung himself into her outstretched arms in an agony of remorse! And how tightly she pressed him to her loving heart, laughing and crying in a breath, too thankful for mere words!

'Go back, darling! Go back, darling little sister.'

'No,' said Petronilla. 'I will never leave you, Petronel.'

'But the king—and the queen? Are you not married yet? Oh, why did they let you come here?—why did they let you come here? I thought I had left you safe and happy!'

'I am happy,' said Petronilla, smiling through her tears. 'Oh, believe it, Petronel; now I have found you, I want nothing more.'

'But you cannot stay here with me!' cried he, in great agitation. 'This is no fit place for such as you. Heaven will bless you, Petronilla, for your goodness to me. But go. Pray go at once, before it is too late.'

'No,' said she, clasping him still closer; 'no, Petronel.'

'But you cannot help me now. I am in the power of the wicked fairies,' said he, shuddering. 'They have only left me for a short while. In a few moments they will be back again, and then'—

'We will resist them together,' said Petronilla firmly.

'But they will surround us on every side; you don't know them. Hark!'

'It is horses' hoofs,' said Petronilla.

'They are coming—they are coming!' cried Petronel wildly. 'Save yourself—save yourself, Petronilla!'

'I am safe,' said she calmly; 'quite safe, dear Petronel.'

But he threw his arms up in great agony. 'They lured me away by promises, promises which they will never keep. But I am theirs, theirs for ever! No hope—no escape!'

'The road I came by is short and easy, dear brother,' whispered Petronilla. 'Take courage, dear heart; let us go back home at once.'

But Petronel's limbs were heavy indeed. Petronilla's, bruised and travel-worn as they were, were yet lighter and swifter. She put her arms round him and dragged him two or three steps along the crooked, narrow pathway; but, alas! her strength was well-nigh spent; and though he did his best to follow her, his best was but feeble.

'Leave me,' said he faintly, the great wet drops standing on his forehead; 'leave me, Petronilla; save yourself. I have deserved it. Hark, hark! how close they are coming. Oh, run, run!' cried he, pushing her away from him.

They were indeed coming. Petronilla could hear plainly now their fierce shouts, and their wild, weird laughter, and the hurried tramp of their horses' hoofs.

'This way,' cried she, with fresh-born energy, 'this way, Petronel; do make one effort—one brave effort, Petronel.'

But Petronel only shuddered, and cowered down to the very ground at her feet, pressing his hands to his ears to keep out the sound of the coming band. Petronilla cast her eyes about her in despair.

'Why, Petronel—Petronel!' cried she, shaking him,

'here's a boat at the water's edge. Couldn't we get away in that? Do, dear Petronel, try to get as far as the boat. See, it's only two steps farther.'

Meanwhile the fierce shouting, and the wild, weird laughter, and the hurried tramp of hoofs, came nearer and nearer still; until at last Petronel, maddened with terror, roused himself and started to his feet.

'Stand back!' cried he loudly, 'stand back, Petronilla; they cannot possibly harm you! Heaven will protect its own. Farewell—farewell!'

So saying, he flung her from him, threw himself forward towards the river's edge, and bounded in one great, despairing leap into the boat.

'Farewell!' cried he once more; 'do not follow me. This boat means death!'

But Petronilla, quick as lightning, had already reached his side. The cord was loosened, the boat slid out from the bank upon the dark, deep water, and was carried swiftly down the stream.

Locked in each other's arms, the brother and sister knelt, awe-struck and trembling, while the tall fir-trees seemed to slip by them. Already the fierce shouts, and the wild, weird laughter, and the tramp of the horses' hoofs, were growing fainter and fainter in the distance. They were indeed safe from the wicked fairies' power, for not even the wicked fairies themselves would dare

to face the awful cataract of swollen waters that lay before that little boat.

Petronilla knew it, and she knelt calm and resigned, while Heaven's sweet peace crept into her heart and abode there. And Petronel knew it, and knelt sobbing bitterly.

Fearful were the sights that met their eyes on all sides; for horrible, long-toothed, long-haired, wild-eyed witches sat on the rocky banks and stretched out their long, lean arms to clutch at them as they passed. Shrill-voiced, hideous-faced gnomes and goblins leapt out of the water to them, and threw foul and noisome river-weeds and insects at them. And great, slimy water-serpents, and huge, yawning crocodiles swam round the boat, hissing and grinding their teeth at them. And huge vultures, and owls, and enormous horned moths flew, flap-flapping their long, dusty wings in their very faces. And great water-beetles and fat, hairy spiders crawled up the very sides of the boat by thousands.

Narrower and narrower still became the river, and higher and higher the gloomy overhanging rocks that bordered it. And now, for the first time, the distant roar of the great cataract broke upon their young ears. Already the sullen, black ripples had become angry little waves; and the boat no longer glided swiftly and smoothly forward, but swung unsteadily to and fro, as

Petronel and Petronilla escape in the boat.--*Page* 40.

it danced lightly from current to current, and from eddy to eddy.

'Petronilla,' whispered Petronel, clinging to her with icy-cold fingers, 'oh, how frightened I am! Cannot we be saved, Petronilla? Can't you do something to save us?'

'No, Petronel,' said she. 'We are safe now.'

Petronel lifted his astonished, tear-stained face to hers. Petronilla smiled back at him.

'Why, Petronilla,' said he, scarcely above his breath, 'what's that lovely star shining on your forehead?'

And lo! the fairy's promise was kept; for the star shone on Petronilla's forehead bright and clear, as one of God's own bright stars in heaven.

'Where, dear Petronel?' asked she. 'Of what star are you speaking?'

But Petronel did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the lovely star. A look of peace unutterable had stolen over his face; he was afraid no longer.

And as they went, the horrible witches fled from before them, and the hobgoblins plunged back into the deep water; and the crocodiles and the serpents fell back humbly and reverently; and the great, fierce birds were now as gentle and as timid as doves; and the noisome weeds and insects were gone as if by magic; and the gloomy overhanging rocks seemed rocks no longer, but great, soft, fleecy clouds; and the dark trees blossomed

with a thousand sweet-smelling flowers; and the sullen water sparkled like diamonds as it reflected back the lovely star a thousand and a thousandfold; and, though the cataract was now very near indeed, the nearer and nearer it was, the brighter and brighter shone Petronilla's star in brilliant glory over her head.

Presently there came a rush, and a white foam, and a blinding spray, and a deafening roar.

'We are in the rapids,' said Petronilla. 'You are not afraid, Petronel?'

'Nay,' said he, gently kissing her; 'of what should I be afraid?'

And heart to heart, hand in hand, they went over the great cataract!

II.

THE TWO LEAVES.

THE TWO LEAVES.

THE whole court had been thrown into confusion. The princess, who was exceedingly beautiful and accomplished, had just haughtily refused her seventy-eighth suitor, a prince of some standing among princes, and by no means to be despised as a husband, even by so beautiful and accomplished a lady as herself. And the king, who was

heartily tired of his daughter's frivolous, heartless conduct, in encouraging the attentions of so many worthy gentlemen only to reject them with contempt when they proposed for her hand, had given her very clearly to understand that the time had arrived for her to choose which of the princes she would accept as her husband; that great princesses, such as herself, had other duties than those belonging to the estate of a mere private lady to perform in life; that it was the earnest wish of the people that she should marry early, and that the king, too, greatly desired her prompt establishment; and that the most difficult creature to please in the whole world might surely find one among the seventy-eight suitors to whom she could contentedly at least give her hand. The king also added, that if her choice was not made within the next four-and-twenty hours, he should order the common brander of the royal cattle to brand the tip of her elegant little nose with a small red cross, like as one brands mules, sheep, and such obstinate-minded animals. Whether the king meant to carry this frightful threat into execution or not, in the event of the princess still proving contumacious, is of course doubtful; probably not. It had, however, the effect that it was intended to produce; the princess was frightened out of her silly obstinacy. She answered, what everybody knew before, namely, that the king's

will being law, and the tip of her nose very dear to her, she would immediately give all her attention to the selection of a future spouse. In fact, she might almost say she had already selected him, but that being, as the king had said himself, a very great princess indeed, she conceived it but just that certain privileges should of right be hers; and that she would even consent to defer her own choice to that of the king, if he would permit her to exact the fulfilment of one little condition only, from any one or any number of princes who might be willing to repeat their offer of marriage, before becoming his wife. To this the king, in an unguarded moment, consented. The prince was chosen, and, also in an unguarded moment, gladly consented to submit to the one little condition, and agreed not to claim the hand of his promised bride until he had fulfilled it; would her Royal Highness name the condition? Whereupon the princess smiled very sweetly indeed upon the king and the prince, and named it. The condition was this: 'That the prince should present her as a betrothal gift with two leaves of any kind he chose, exactly and entirely alike in every minute particular.'

At first view this condition appeared so ridiculously simple, that the prince and the king looked at one another in mute astonishment, asking themselves if they could believe their own ears, or if the wayward princess

were indulging in a joke! Time, however, convinced them that this little condition imposed by the princess was by no means such a joke as they had imagined.

Not to make a short story too long, it will be best to divide at once into three divisions the two hundred and twelve princes who, each in their turn, led away by the hope of obtaining the hand of the lovely princess, and by the apparent simplicity of the condition imposed by her, had undertaken, one after the other, to find, in their respective kingdoms, two leaves exactly and entirely alike in every minute particular.

The first division accepted by the princess consisted of twenty-nine princes of the first rank, all sons of reigning kings, heirs-apparent—young, pre-eminently handsome, wealthy, and, last but not least, of exalted virtue.

It was therefore not difficult for the fastidious princess, as each separate one failed in his attempt to find two leaves exactly alike, to choose a fresh candidate from the remaining number. But as there were after all only twenty-nine of these princes, and as each prince had but one month allowed him for the search of the leaves, it follows that at the end of two years and five months the first division of eligible princes was exhausted.

The next division consisted of eighty-one younger sons, uncles, brothers, and cousins of reigning monarchs —some young and good-looking, and tolerably wealthy ;

some plain or poor; some neither one thing or another, but simply indifferently eligible; and these princes, being eighty-one in number, were only allowed one week to look for the leaves. However, as they had but little lands of their own to look over, it followed that they must needs search over the lands that had already been well searched before by their royal brothers and nephews and cousins. Every one of this division failed also.

The third and last division consisted of a hundred and two odds and ends of royalty,—great-grandsons and great-grandnephews, sons of ex-kings, and pretenders to crowns; princes without money, and some but with doubtful right to their titles; princes by courtesy, and princes on sufferance;—princes, in short, that were as undesirable a set (whatever their personal qualities may have been) to choose from as could well be imagined; and it was certainly not a matter for disappointment when it was known that the whole of them had failed also.

But by the time that they had done looking, no less than six years and two months had passed away, and no two leaves had yet been found which, when viewed through a powerful microscope, corresponded with each other exactly and entirely in every minute particular. If they were alike as to size, the colour was not the same. If the colour was the same in every part of both leaves to the very nicest degrees of shade, the one

would be a hair's-breadth wider or longer than the other. If both size and colour were exactly similar in both leaves, the one would have a tiny brown or red spot, or a little raised vein running through it, which the other had not. Or it would have a thicker or a longer stalk, or a differently shaped tip. And if both leaves had the same spots, veins, and stalks as to size, shape, and number, they would not have them in precisely the same part of the leaf; or there might be more little jagged points to the edges of one leaf than the other. Or if the number were the same all round, there might be more on one side than on the other. No two leaves when closely compared could be found to resemble each other in every minute particular. It was enough to make one feel humble indeed, to mark the infinite variety to be found in one of the smallest of Heaven's marvellous gifts—the unconsidered leaves on the trees.

Things were now beginning to look rather serious. If the king was obstinate, the princess was more so; and her father having once given his word, he was not able to depart from it. There were now, it seemed, no more princes, and very few leaves left. And the princess did not, of course, grow younger as the years passed on. Time had, it is true, dealt gently with her. Fascinated, perhaps, by her extreme beauty, he had laid but a light hand on her smooth brow in his greetings to

her morning after morning; and though she was nearly seven years older than when we first knew her, she was still a very beautiful creature, and looked but little older than then.

The great pity of it all was, that this long-continued search for leaves had finished by materially altering the character and climate of the land, and consequently had not been without some influence on the very dispositions and character of the people themselves. For the last six or seven years there had not been one single farmer, or market-gardener, or labourer, that had not, in the hope of obtaining the very large rewards offered both by king and princes, given up a great portion of his time to the search for or the actual cultivation of leaves; and agriculture in general had suffered greatly from the mania that prevailed.

Not only agriculture: the arts and sciences, too, were sufferers in a great measure from this general craze. Nobody painted anything but leaves—leaves singly and minutely—leaves in groups and effectively. Long poems were written to leaves. Songs were written about leaves. Books were written on leaves by the hundred; and nobody talked of anything but leaves. Patent medicines of any reputation and efficacy were all supposed, and said, to be compounds of different leaves. Leaf colour (which admits in-

deed of much variety!) was the only colour worn by women of fashion, and wreaths of leaves were the only head-dresses in vogue. In fact, flowers were nowhere, and leaves were everywhere. The man who invented a new machine, the discoverer of a new star, the originator of a successful scheme, the engineer who planned great works, the architect of a splendid building, the solvers of great problems in science,—all these men came second in the public estimation to the fortunate possessor of a valuable collection of almost similar pairs of leaves. And worse still, if in some places little new-born shrubberies and baby-woods and forests were growing up, and being fostered with tender care, with a view to the formation of a new generation of uniform leaves, yet in other places great forests had disappeared; that is, the leaves had been so cruelly and persistently stripped from them, that the trees were now nothing but great black trunks, dying or dead—for a tree depends greatly on its leaves for its life. And this looked not only exceedingly ugly, but let through the cold draughts of air so easily to the villages and towns which the forests had hitherto so carefully protected and sheltered, that colds and coughs and rheumatism were now gradually undermining the constitutions and the tempers of their, until now, healthy and amiable inhabitants.

Things, in fact, had arrived at that state of discomfort and uncertainty which may be generally described as 'loggerheads,' when one day the glorious announcement was made that a prince had been overlooked! that he was fitted in every way to take the foremost place in the foremost rank of princes; and that he was now on his way to Leafland (as it was now ironically termed by neighbouring states), to place himself at the disposal of the king and the princess, as far as regards a final search for two perfectly similar leaves. And very shortly the overlooked prince arrived at the palace, and made known his request.

Suffice it to say, that his personal appearance was so attractive, his manners so charming, and the way in which he spoke so courteous, that not only the king himself and all the court were delighted with him, but the haughty princess herself admitted that he was quite worthy of her esteem, and that it would cause her much gratification to learn that he had been successful in his search for the two leaves. More than this, it was confidentially whispered about, that the little matter of the two leaves might, if he pleased, in this case be perhaps dispensed with, if—

But here the ambassadors, ministers plenipotentiary, and consuls of the nations to which the other two hundred and twelve princes belonged, violently interposed;

and after the consumption of at least five hundred and thirty-two quires of writing-paper, and about thirty-seven pounds of red sealing-wax, it was made perfectly clear to the king, that, should the conditions imposed on the other two hundred and twelve princes fail to be as strenuously insisted on in the case of this particular prince, that their respective governments must, and assuredly would, take umbrage thereat; and that the king who permitted himself to show this offensive partiality, and was capable of suffering two hundred and twelve gentlemen to be made complete fools of by his capricious daughter, might have to pay for his indecision of character by being compelled to make war with a great many more nations than might be quite convenient at the same time.

The new prince, however, who was evidently much impressed by the princess' great beauty, averted all fear of a complicated misunderstanding between the nations, by saying, very modestly, that as he himself did not wish to make enemies of so large a number as two hundred and twelve princes, he would prefer to be allowed to look for the leaves as they had also done. He added also, that the search should be so vigorously carried on, that he felt almost confident of success.

At this the king repeated the word 'almost' with a dismal shake of the head. There had been a great many pairs of leaves that had 'almost' matched.

The prince therefore set out for his own country (which was happily very thickly wooded) without further delay, promising to return with or without the leaves at the expiration of one month's time.

He kept his word. Exactly to the day, hour, and minute, the punctual prince arrived back in Leafland; and there were great rejoicings in the city. *Why*, neither king, princess, or people could possibly say; but the general impression certainly was that this particular prince would prove to have been successful in his search.

It is true that there had been rain falling on three following Mondays between the hours of ten and eleven. That was a good sign! Then two rooks and a rooklet had been observed sitting on a church wall with their tails turned eastward and their beaks turned westward. That was another good sign! There had been also a great yield of barley that year, and there had been more grey kittens than black or white born during the last week. These were all reassuring signs enough, as any one will of course confess. Therefore, expectation running high, great preparations were made. Triumphal arches were erected; balls and banquets were organized; streets were hung with flags and red bunting; the whole city was crowded with people; and lastly, the king and princess, when they heard that the

prince had entered the gates, repaired with anxious hearts and faces smothered with smiles to a splendid pavilion erected in front of the palace, and awaited his coming, surrounded by the whole of the ladies and gentlemen of the court.

The prince arrived, plainly dressed and alone. He seemed slightly surprised at the enthusiastic reception he met with, but acknowledged it politely and seriously, as if his mind were not given to frivolity and excitement. When he arrived in front of the pavilion, he dismounted from his horse, and gave the bridle into the hands of a soldier who stood near, and proceeded on foot and bareheaded towards the pavilion. When the usual courtesies had been interchanged, the prince, without further preamble, proceeded with a calm and dignified air to speak as follows:—

'Your Majesty—your Royal Highness,—Before I proceed to satisfy the intense curiosity which doubtless reigns in every heart here present,—before I either give assurance of my success, or ask indulgence for my failure,—may I be permitted to acquaint your Majesty, her Royal Highness, and this noble company of ladies and gentlemen, with the way in which search was made for the much wished-for leaves?'

Permission being granted, of course, the prince resumed as follows:—

'When I first undertook to search for the two leaves, believe me, it was not with any undue confidence in my own powers. I could scarcely expect to succeed where so many others had already failed before me. If, however, the only tasks that were undertaken were those the successful completion of which were not a matter of doubt but a certainty, kings and subjects must alike be fain to content themselves with few enterprises. I had resolved, having once undertaken the task, to bring it, if humanly possible, to a satisfactory conclusion. I immediately gave orders to my head forester to let me have twenty large bales of leaves furnished at the palace every twenty-four hours. I gave orders to all the governors of the different provinces, and the mayors of the different towns, to organize companies of leaf-pickers and leaf-comparers, without loss of time, at the rate of no less than fifteen bales of leaves in the twenty-four hours. And I authorized them to offer large rewards to the finder of twin-leaves. As for my own bales, I placed myself at the head of an intelligent number of searchers and comparers, and I set apart sixteen hours out of the twenty-four for the purpose of inspecting the twenty bales. I was somewhat fatigued, not being accustomed to the work, after the first sixteen hours of unceasing search and comparison of leaves; and before I retired to rest, I went down into

my private garden to breathe the fresh air for a while. It was a lovely moonlight night; the air was soft and warm. I sat myself down under a favourite old oak tree, and, as was natural, I fell asleep, and I presume that I must have dreamt. Such a dream! Never had I seen—never shall I see again, such a wonderful concourse of feathered creatures as I beheld before me then. From the largest and most powerful birds of prey, down to the tiniest midge, everything that had wings seemed to be there. The mass of colours, too, was most bewilderingly beautiful. The brilliant reds and blues and greens of the parrots; and the bright yellows and orange of the cockatoos; the delicate pinks and greys of the wood-doves; the soft deep crimson of the robin redbreasts; the never-ending shades of browns and drabs and fawns of the nightingales, chaffinches, bullfinches, and linnets; the deep blue and white of the swallows; the gorgeous golds and bronzes of the golden pheasants, and the equally shining dark-greens and purples of the homely roosters; the dazzling combination of iridescent hues that forms the plumage of the humming-bird; and the magnificent blue-blacks of the ravens; and the sombre, drowsy splendour of the rock-coloured eagles;—each and all of these were there in countless numbers,—magnified, and glorified, and radiant under the searching light of the steel-blue

moon. Never was there a more enchanting scene! Nor must I forget to mention the uncountable myriads of insects that hovered above, and literally hung like a glittering canopy over my head. What, however, was most strange was, that not one sound, not one cry, did those many millions of birds emit. There was a motive for this unusual silence. Scarcely had they, with a sound of moving wings like the rush of a hurricane amid the foliage of a giant forest, settled quietly down either on the ground at my feet, or upon the lower branches of the trees that surrounded me, than a great eagle, stepping majestically to the front, addressed me with a remarkable air of quiet dignity as follows :—

'"Great Prince!—You are doubtless aware, that in depriving a tree of its leaves, you not only deprive it of its beauty and its pride, but possibly of its good health, if not of its actual existence; that you take from countless myriads of living creatures their only means of nourishment, and thus doom them to an early death; that you deprive a thousand little birds, whose sweet tones you so gladly welcome round your homes, of their only shelter; that you expose their little nests, their little eggs, and their little selves, either to the fierce rays of the burning sun, the cold blasts of the searching winds, or the penetrating drip-dripping of the rain. In short, you deprive the brief and unassuming

life of all these simple little creatures not only of their only home and their only means of support, but of their only pleasures and their only joys. You would doubtless do this unthinkingly. And, as unthinkingly, you would thus set an example to your subjects of indifference to the well-being of the lower order of created things, which they, still unthinkingly, may not be slow to follow. Already has this kingdom been overrun with half-starved birds and insects from the neighbouring states, whose princes have not been more fortunate than doubtless you would be yourself in your search for companion leaves. We are ourselves, although we appear so numerous, but a very small proportion of the winged life that rests on rock and hill, and in wood and valley, of your vast kingdom. We plead, therefore, not for the trees which will be spared, since they will be many, no doubt; we plead for the many unhappy trees that are already doomed. We will give, one and all, our lives for you, if you wish for them; and there is no reason to think that our beloved green trees are not equally ready. If such a course as you are now pursuing can give you one moment's happiness, or spare you one moment's pain; if you can look into your heart and say that the sacrifice of these million little harmless lives will not be a vain one, then we have no more to say. We are not here to rebel against your royal decrees, or to cavil at

your royal decisions. We are here only to ask you one single question, and the answer shall come from your own heart. Are these two leaves necessary to any one human being's happiness? Prince, I have said."

'And then I thought that the whole mass of winged creatures with one accord rose into the air with a whirl and a rush—and I awoke. This dream, Princess, left such an extraordinary impression on me, that from that moment I stopped my search for the two leaves in question, and gave strict orders for all my subjects to do so likewise. My other dear subjects, the pleasant little birds and the busy little insects, have no more to fear from me. The strangest part of it all, however, has still to be told. I passed the rest of the month in attending to some of the lesser duties of a prince's life. The eagle had read me a lesson, and I much desired to profit by it. The morning, however, that I was to set out for this country, in order to acquaint you simply with my failure, I dreamt a second dream, and in it a little grey nightingale flew into my room with two oak leaves in her beak, which she carefully deposited at my feet, saying to me:

'"Prince,—The little creatures you have spared have been hard at work for you! Thousands of keen little eyes, millions of unwearied little legs, myriads upon myriads of agile, untiring wings have been at your

service. They have searched, compared, measured unceasingly for the last month; and at last—they have found! A million million of grateful hearts send you these two oak leaves, which you will find exactly and entirely alike in every minute particular. We are very little creatures, it is true! But if the love and good wishes of such small things as we can benefit such a mighty prince as yourself, know that there is not one beat, one throb, one thought of our grateful hearts that is not wholly yours. Farewell!"

'The nightingale then flew out of the window, and I awoke! Whether it was really a dream or not, I cannot tell; but at my feet lay the two leaves, which I have the honour to present to your Royal Highness. The window was wide open, and such a glorious flood of melody greeted my ears as only the voice of a nightingale can produce.'

The prince ceased speaking, and taking the two leaves from a little gold case, he presented them to the princess. It needed little on her part, and that of the king (who had now become an expert in the judging of leaves), to see that these two were each one the exact counterpart of the other. Their own reflection in a looking-glass could not have been more alike than those two leaves.

The joy of the king knew no bounds. And the

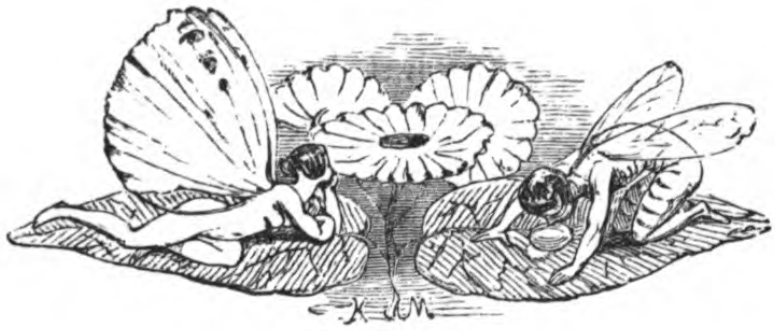
princess herself rose from her seat, and came forward with a smile and a blush.

'Valiant prince,' she began; but the serious look on the prince's face stopped further oratory on her part.

'Princess,' said he, 'I cannot but think that the joy which the mere possession of these much wished-for leaves affords you must be greater than the love that you are likely to feel for a mere husband, otherwise you would not have sent away from you over two hundred and twelve devoted gentlemen, whose only failing appears to have been that they were unfortunate in their search for two little leaves! You have not taken the will for the deed, however earnest the will may have been. You have required the leaves themselves. To my mind, the richest and best gift that king or subject can offer to his wife is a true heart. A true heart, Princess, is not what you have sought. If to the gratification of a false notion of pride—if to the satisfaction of an unmeaning caprice—if from a too small consideration for the feelings of others, or a too large opinion of your own importance, you have been capable of idly sacrificing the marked and express wishes of an aged father, and the happiness of two hundred and twelve faithful hearts, and the well-being of a country and a people, then it is evident that you are not fitted to become a good queen, a loving wife, or a devoted mother. I will not, I dare not, trust

the happiness of my people, or that of myself and my children, to such a one as yourself; and I now most gladly bid you farewell for ever!'

So saying he leapt into his saddle, struck spurs into his horse, and was gone! And the princess was left alone with her two oak leaves!



III.

CATS AND DOGS.

CATS AND DOGS.

YOU never heard such a pitiful mewing in all your lives. The people who lived in the great grey house by the roadside put their heads out of the windows, and half their bodies, and said,—

'Good gracious! there's that dreadful cat again! It's enough to make one ill to hear her!'

But look as they might, they couldn't see her; for her poor, dirty,

draggled white fur was just the very colour of the two or three-day-old snow that lay so thick and so heavy on the ground. It was going to be a miserable night, no doubt. People went about with red noses and tingling finger-ends, saying to one another, 'There's more snow to come down yet!'

Surely there was; and a thick, creeping grey mist too, like a great grey blanket, only not so warm unfortunately.

But the little cat wasn't sorrowing because of the thick snow, or the driving mist, or the nipping evening air, as she trotted hurriedly and uneasily from hedge to hedge, and from tree to tree. She was very weary, it is true; very weary, very hungry, very, very cold. There was a bright kitchen fire awaiting her at the little red-brick house near the turnpike, half a mile or so down the high road; and a little saucerful of milk, a couple of delicious fish-heads on a plate, together with two or three of the most appetizing fowl-bones one could possibly imagine, were hers, if she would only go back to taste them. But she would not go back. She had wandered very far already, it is true; but she would wander yet farther still, heart-broken and despairing, until, perhaps, her little legs should fail her and her little eyes grow dim, and she should sink down on the hard, cruel snow, and close

them for good and all. And as she went, she called out as loud as she could—

'Miaou—miaou—miaou!'

Presently the front door of the great grey house was opened, and a voice called out—

'Here, Scout! Scout, old fellow! There's a cat! Rout her out.'

Alas! poor cat. Scout did not wait to be told twice. Down the garden he bounded, and out at the gateway. Across the road he leapt before you could say two twos, and straight up the road he tore after the poor little cat. Away she skurried, terrified and breathless, with her poor little heart in her mouth. No courage, no strength left to turn and face him boldly with a spit and a scratch, as might have been expected. There were very few dogs or cats that could have made a better race of it than they did. For they were out of sight in a moment; and the people of the house shut the door, and went back laughing to their warm fire-sides again.

Scout was not the dog to do things by halves; and they might be quite sure that the troublesome little cat would annoy them no more that night with her mournful cries.

Meanwhile the cat had lost ground. Not a tree, not a shrub, not even a single miserable mile-post that

she could spring up within a hundred yards at least; and before she could run that distance,—ah me! at the mere thought of those great jaws, that wide-open mouth, those shining, fierce white teeth, she could run no more. Courage, strength, breath,—all were gone. She turned round, though, poor little desperate thing, and faced her pursuer with one piteous cry for mercy, and then her four trembling little legs gave way beneath her. She shut her weary eyes, and she rolled gently over into the snow.

Scout stopped suddenly short. A cat that flew from him was fair sport. A cat that flew *at* him was still fairer sport. But a cat that showed no fight at all! A cat that stopped suddenly short, too, and shut her eyes, and then fainted!

He paused, panting and undecided, his bright red tongue hanging half-way out of his mouth; and he looked intently for some moments at his prostrate game. Presently, getting impatient, he went a little nearer, sniffed her all over, and seeing that she did not move, put one black paw to her white face, and pushed her gently.

'Don't kill me!' murmured she faintly.

'Then you shouldn't make such a miserable noise outside my people's house. If there is one thing they dislike more than another, it is cats. Who are you? Where do you come from?'

'I'm the pussy belonging to the little red-brick house by the turnpike.'

'Oh, you are, are you? And what's your name?'

'Only Pussy.'

'Stupid name, rather! Well, and what do you want?'

'I've lost my kitten!' said the cat in faltering tones.

'Ah, poor soul! Did they—was it—did it—well, did it fall into a bucket of water, with a weight round its neck, by any chance?' said the dog, hesitating merely from motives of delicacy, such as any parent dog or cat would readily appreciate.

'Four of them did, sir. This little darling disappeared by itself.'

'Pooh! stolen, of course. Was it pretty?'

'Oh, so pretty! It had soft grey fur, and a white chest, and th-th-three white p-paws, and a bl-bl-blue ribbon tied round its neck,' sobbed the cat.

'Have you looked anywhere?'

'Everywhere, sir. All over the house and the gardens, and all along this road, up and down, up and down, calling out to her all the while.'

'Yes, I know that!' said the dog, showing his teeth for a moment. 'Don't begin it again, though, that's all. I'm sent out here to stop you; and stop you I must, only I'd as lief not hurt you if I can help it. How did you lose her? Leave off crying, and tell me clearly.'

'This way, sir. The cook had just put me on her own arm-chair, and when I went to sleep she was tumbling about before the kitchen fire, playing with an old cork.'

'What! the cook?'

'No; the kitten. Very well, when I woke up she was gone!'

'Well, and then you looked for her at once, of course?'

'Everywhere! All over the house from top to bottom, fifty times over!'

'Silly-billy! If she was in the house she was all right. If she was in the garden she was all wrong. You should have run out of doors at once, to cut off her retreat.'

'But they locked me up in the coal-cellar, sir!'

'Ah! And they didn't say anything?'

'Only, P-p-poor old p-p-pussy!'

'Ah! Has any one been taking a fancy to your kitten lately? Any visitors been calling at your place?'

'Yes; two little boys and a little girl. They spent a few days here last week, and they were very kind to my kitty.'

Here Scout suddenly pricked up his ears, then dropt them again as suddenly, and stood considering for some moments, with his head on one side.

'Your kitten is safe enough, I'll take my oath on it,' said he presently. 'If it's any comfort to you to think it, I would make pretty sure that she's lying on that very same little girl's lap, half-choked with bread and milk at this very minute. The thing is, where do these good people live?'

'I don't know.'

'Not know! And you in the house nearly the whole day? Why, I'm only let in now and then as a great treat, and it's precious little about my people's family and their friends that I've got to learn. You cats really do sleep when you look as if you were asleep; but half our time we're only listening. Is there anything in the shape of a dog at your little place?'

'Yes; a white poodle.'

'A poodle! Oh, come, come! We shall soon learn something. Can't he help you? Why didn't you apply to him?'

'Because he's old, and blind, and lame. And his skin isn't quite what it has been, or his temper either. And one turn round the garden in the sun is about as much as he can manage now.'

'I must try to get a few words with him, nevertheless,' said the dog. 'Come, screw up your courage! I may be rather violent in my manner; but I wouldn't hurt a frightened, harmless little thing like you for the biggest

marrow bone in the whole world! So dry your eyes, pick yourself up, and let us go and have a word with the poodle.'

Off they set, side by side; the great house-dog moderating his long swinging strides to the cat's meek little trot-trotting, and she, poor small soul, doing her very best to keep up with him.

The red-brick house windows soon loomed bright and pleasant through the now thickly falling snow; and when they had got so far, and were only about twenty yards or so from the house, they stopped to consult awhile.

'The fact is, you must get in somehow,' said the dog. 'You had better stand and mew at the window till they hear you and let you in. They'll be very glad to see you, and very likely offer you warm milk, and all that. Take it. Mind you appear quite at your ease, and don't fidget about, and kick up that hateful noise of yours, or they *may* lock you up in the coal-cellar again! and I shall want you out here. You must whisper to the poodle that he's to make some excuse for being let out into the garden. Tell him the big house-dog at the grey house down yonder wishes to see him. He'll feel flattered, and he'll come. Then, while he is being let out, you must manage to slip away yourself, and '—

'But what if they catch hold of me and lock me up before I see him?'

'Never mind *ifs*. Do your best.'

'Yes; but what if Woolly shouldn't happen to be there?'

'Bless me! what useless talk! Then wait till he is there!'

'But won't you get tired of waiting?'

'My good cat, if we dogs were not blessed with patience, where would our masters be?'

'Then you think'—

But as she spoke there came towards them, borne on the gloomy night air, a sound as of muffled growlings, and impatient snortings, and angry barkings; and the cat jumped.

'Oh, what's that?'

'Well done, Poodle!' whispered Scout, wagging his tail enthusiastically. 'Keep close and silent, Mistress Pussy. They're playing into our own hands. That dog has caught scent of us through the drawing-room window, and he's coming out to see what we are. Well done, sir, for an old one! though I'm sure I beg your pardon for saying so. Old you may be in years, but you've your wits about you still, I see; and I shall be proud to wag tails with you.'

At that moment the window of the red-brick house

drawing-room opened. Out tumbled the poodle blindly and totteringly, but as brave as a lion.

'Mistaken, was he? Fidgety, eh? Dreaming of dogs and cats, was he? If there wasn't something stealing about at the end of the garden among the laurel bushes, why, then, he wasn't a dog himself, but only a great, stupid, fat, overgrown sheep, and that's flat!'

So muttering, he toddled along the pathway, determined to see into things for himself, when—

'Hush! don't bark,—friends!' whispered the big black dog, coming slightly forward.

'What do you want?' asked the poodle, quite on his guard, though.

'You shall hear. Be patient. Do you know this cat?'

The cat came forward trembling, and the poodle sniffed round them both a bit, and took his time over it.

'It's our old pussy,' said he quietly; 'but who are you?'

'The house-dog belonging to the grey house. Yes; that's your pussy. Now tell me where's her kitten?'

The poodle chuckled. 'They think themselves mighty clever,' said he. 'But a mother's heart is a mother's heart; ay, let it be cats, dogs, or squirrels. The kitten, sir, is gone to Jeddleford.'

'Bless us! that's twenty miles off!'

'Nearer twenty-five,' said the poodle, 'and across country, too.'

'You can't do that,' cried Scout in dismay, turning to the cat.

'Can't I!' cried she, all aglow.

'I daresay she could,' said the poodle kindly; 'the kitten being at the other end, you know.'

'Try me,' said the cat earnestly.

'Very sorry I can't help you,' said the poodle. 'I suppose you'll set off at once.—There they go, calling, "Woolly, Woolly, Woolly!"—All right—all right—Bow-wow—I'm coming! Bless us all! the house can take care of itself for five minutes, I suppose. Well, sir,' turning to Scout, 'I can't see you very distinctly, but I feel sure you are a dog after my own heart, and I'm proud to wag tails with you, sir. I must go in-doors now, for if I don't they'll all come trooping out after me, in their thin evening shoes and their silly bare heads; and then I shall have their colds and coughs too, as well as their plate and linen, on my mind. Good evening. I shall be pleased to see the kitten back. She was a foolish little person, but she amused me.'

'You do me much honour,' said Scout politely. 'I hope we may meet again.'

'Here, Woolly, Woolly! you naughty dog, sir! Woolly!' cried one or two voices from the firelit glass door.

"Oh! Bow-wow-wow!' cried Woolly snappishly, as he hobbled back.

'Now let's be off to Jeddleford at once,' said the house-dog to the cat. Whereupon they started, then and there, for a twenty-four-mile journey, with far less preparation than you or I would make for a two-mile walk! And meanwhile, what about the grey kitten?

The kitten was lying curled up in a lap;
It had fallen asleep o'er its evening pap;
And the thoughts of the tears its poor mother would shed,
Oh, 'tis little *they* troubled that soft little head!
It was warm, it was full; so it rested and slept,
And straight into pussy-like fairyland crept;
Where new milk and blue ribbon, and corks tied to strings,
Made up the sum total of all wished-for things.

The next morning there was quite a commotion at the breakfast-table of one of the principal houses in Jeddleford.

'Did you hear what a noise those fowls made in the night?' said some one.

'Did I hear it? I couldn't sleep a wink for it. What could it possibly have been?' said some one else.

'Rats, I suppose. We must see if the fowls are all

right this morning. Tell some one to go round to the poultry-yard and have them counted.'

The voice, being a voice of authority, was obeyed at once, and very shortly the messenger returned with the answer,—

'No, the fowls were not all right. There was a tender young chicken missing; and there were enough feathers lying about the hen-house floor to stuff a sofa-cushion with. And moreover, the little wooden shutter with the broken hinge was quite broken now, and swinging to and fro. And when the hen-house door was opened the first thing in the morning, all the fowls were huddled up together in one corner, as if they'd been frightened.'

'Ah! rats, of course.'

'What! Rats open a window? All that way from the ground, too?'

'Rats will do anything. Rats would walk quietly up your legs and arms, and nibble the nose off your face, if you would only stand still and let them.'

At this there was a laugh all round. But perhaps there would have been no laughing if they could have seen that rascal Scout, and the poor weary little cat, lying a few hundred steps only away from the house, snug and close in a ditch, half covered by an overhanging bramble-bush hedge, licking their lips over the last

savoury bit of raw chicken! To do her justice, the cat had protested. Yes, she was hungry! Yes, she would like her supper! She was very weary, as weary as she could well be; but they had always trusted her at the little red-brick house with untold milk and cream, and she had never betrayed her trust. She was no thief herself, and she would rather not steal now. Here the dog interrupted her,—

'Thieve, indeed! When I was a puppy,—well, I might perhaps have taken a stray chicken or so, now and then; but since then, for private reasons which I need scarcely mention, the different views which dog and master are apt to take of such matters, the size of the stick that—ahem—is kept in the umbrella-stand behind the hall door—all things considered, in fact, I've come to the conclusion that, as a rule, honesty is decidedly the best policy. However, this case appears to me to be an exception. This is not the little red-brick house, and there is no cream in question. We have travelled some two dozen miles in the snow after your own child, that has been ruthlessly torn from your agonized bosom. We shall have to wait here till morning as it is, before we can begin to look for her, and are we to have nothing to comfort us meanwhile? They're not likely to send us out a plateful of bones for supper, are they? Besides, the long and short of it is this, I

can't look for kittens on an empty stomach. I know just where the poultry-yard is, and I'll manage to get into the hen-house somehow or other; and I'll be back with you before you've had time to count your claws twice over.'

Alas, alas! for the poor pussy's good resolutions. Briefly, Scout was daring and expeditious; the fowl he brought back was young and tender; and the supper was a great success.

It was weary work enough, waiting until the house doors were opened the next day—weary and anxious work; for although it was only a stone wall that separated the cat from her kitten now, yet the question was still unanswered as to how she was to transfer herself to the inner side of it, and, granting that *that* were accomplished, how she was to find her kitten and transfer herself back to the outer side of the wall again without being noticed.

Scout, however, induced her to wait patiently for an opportunity, and to attempt nothing rashly.

It was a fine bright morning. The mist had cleared off, and the snow had ceased falling; and it was just the very morning, with all that fine white snow lying on the ground, for a couple of little boys and a little girl to come forth, with mits on their pink hands and comforters tied round their necks, and indulge in a

regular good game of snow-balling. And then, while they were all hard at it, would be the very time for the cat to slip into the house unobserved, and to look for her kitten.

The little boys, however, had gone back to school since that—to the poor cat—most memorable day when they went to stay for a short while at the little red-brick house, and lost their hearts to her kitten; and so, by and by, when the front door opened, and the little girl came out dressed for her morning walk, it was only the little girl, and there were no little boys following her.

'No boys! then they've stayed at home with the kitten;—that's a bore,' muttered the dog between his teeth.

But the cat gave a jump that nearly sent her friend, who was only standing on three legs, sprawling on his back.

'Oh, oh!' cried she, pressing one trembling paw to her beating heart.

'What's the matter?' inquired Scout. 'Is the fowl disagreeing with you?'

'No. Oh, my kitty! There she is—there, in her muff! I can see her lovely little head, and the white spots, and the blue ribbon. Oh, my little kitty—my little kitty!'

'S-sh!' whispered the dog; 'we're in luck, then. The little girl is going for a walk *alone!* I think I can manage to get that little kitten out of that muff. Hark! what's that the nurserymaid is saying to her? —"Don't go beyond the gate, Miss Flossy, for there's a strange, ugly, big black dog about somewhere."— Strange, ugly, big black dog, indeed! I'll strange-ugly-big-black-dog her one of these days, I can tell her! Now, my dear, keep quiet, and don't excite yourself. What we've got to do now is to lie perfectly still and observe Miss Flossy's slightest movements. The nurserymaid has gone in and shut the door. Good! Now, vigilance, patience, and presence of mind be our watchwords, and success will crown our endeavours.'

'Do you think she'd drop my kitty if I flew straight at her face and scratched it?' asked the cat in a whisper.

'It is likely; but if you do, I'll fly straight at yours, Mrs. Treacherous,' said the dog warmly.

Miss Flossy's movements were not difficult to observe. Like the good little girl she was, she walked steadily and seriously up and down from the side door of the house to the great white gate that led on to the road, in the very middle of the space that the gardener had cleared in the pathway amidst last night's snow; confiding her opinion to the little bright-eyed kitten, as

she walked, that that same dark brown, pebbly pathway, and the hard white snow that bordered it, reminded her a good deal more of rich iced plumcake than was quite pleasant, seeing that the resemblance stopped entirely short at mere outward appearance. And during this little conversation she lifted her muff to her face very often, and kissed the little kitten fondly on its eyes and nose,—which was not, perhaps, altogether so soothing an attention as she imagined it to be. And she pulled its tiny white whiskers once or twice to make it mew.

'Oh dear, oh dear!' cried its poor mamma from her hiding-place; 'she surely must know that that is one of the most painful things in the world.'

'Except having your tail trod on,' said the dog with a shudder.

Miss Flossy, however, meant it all quite kindly. Indeed, so much absorbed was she in the contents of her little muff, that she forgot to look where she was going, tripped over a large stone, stumbled, and down she came, flat on her poor little nose.

Away flew the muff yards off! Out tumbled the kitten, frightened out of its little wits, and skurried away as hard as it could go! Up struggled the little girl, covered with snow and wet gravel, but nothing daunted, and toddled bravely after it!

'Now's your time,' whispered the dog. 'Catch her

Away flew the muff and out tumbled the kitten —*Page* 84.

up in your mouth! Make for the road! Hide anywhere you like, and wait for me.'

Out sprang the cat; the kitten was caught up in her tender mouth the very next second. And then it was scramble, tumble, hurry-skurry, helter-skelter through the snow, with both cat and little girl. A squeeze through the bars of the gate (that was for the cat and kitten only—the little girl was a great deal too fat, and was obliged to stop and pull the gate open).

'Oh, oh! oo naughty pussy-cat!' cried she, all over tears, snow, and gravel, as she hurried out into the road, quite forgetting what her nurse had said. 'Oo naughty cat, oo has dot mine kitty, oo's dot mine kitty!'

Scout—artful dog!—let her run. He contented himself with trotting after her, keeping carefully out of her sight. But no sooner was she well in the high road, between the tall, snow-laden hedges, and out of sight of her home, than he quickened his speed, overtook and ran past her, suddenly stopped short between herself and the fugitive cat, and then turned and faced her with bristling ears, an erect tail, grinning lips, and fierce white teeth, and a most alarming growl.

'Oh, oh!'

Here was a horrible dilemma. The great, strange, ugly, big black dog! and she must either face him and pass him, or lose her kitty!

Being a brave little thing, she made an attempt. She stamped her foot, looked as angry as she could, which was a mere nothing, and cried out in her sweet baby voice—

'Doe 'way—doe 'way, sir! What oo doin' here?'

Whereupon Scout showed his teeth still more plainly, growled still more alarmingly, and came bounding and leaping towards her across a full half of the distance that had as yet divided them.

She turned and fled, crying loudly—

'Ma! Ma! Ma!

'Poor little maid!' sighed Scout as he turned and ran off the other way. 'I can't bear to frighten children. I wish I'd had the time to stop and make friends with her. She's just the sort of little girl to have run back home for a bit of cake for me, though she *had* been warned against me. Ah! well—business is business. I must be thinking of that cat. I wonder where she has got to, the helpless little creature!'

This was a question that was soon answered. Scout had gone but a very little way down the road, bounding from side to side as he went, sniffing here and there; peeping, searching, scratching at every step; and every now and then standing quite still, with erect tail and ears, to listen if he could hear her.

When he did hear her, there was a faint, distant sound

of mewing, which, as he sprang forward to meet it, shortly became a desperate agony of loud, clamorous mewing; and in a minute or so there was the little cat herself coming back again full pelt along the road. And the kitten was not with her!

'Hallo! what's the matter now? where's the kitten?'

'Oh, oh! Mr. Scout. I'm dead! I'm done for! My dear little kitty! My own precious child!'

'Well, speak!'

'Drowned!' screamed the cat in an agony of grief.

'Where? How? Another bucket? Dropt her in yourself, or what? Speak, can't you!'

'Boys!' gasped the cat. 'Wicked monsters—surrounded me—threw stones—caught me—I fought—scratched—spit. No use, no use! A great fearful pond down the road.'

'Well, well; go on!'

'They're going to send her to sea in a basket-lid,' cried the cat despairingly.

'Going! Oh, you silly-billy! you said she was drowned. Where's the pond? Never say die, madam; what's a bit of a pond to me? Come, step out briskly, and show me the way. What! you can't? There, then, jump on my back. Stick on. Dig your claws into the fur, and keep up your pecker! How many boys did you say there were?'

'Oh, millions!'

'Is that all? I'll soon settle them!' cried Scout as he ran a great deal more courageously than he felt; for though all dogs dearly love children who treat them kindly, there is nothing they dread more than a cruel, thoughtless boy or girl, whose only pleasure in dumb animals seems to consist in teasing and annoying them for no reason whatever.

It is a sorry thing to put distrust into such a trusting thing as a dog's heart!

When they reached the pond they found that it was not a pond at all, but a very large piece of water indeed; so wide and so deep, that the frost of the last two nights had had no effect on it, beyond making it most bitterly, bitingly cold.

At the water's edge there were some two dozen noisy young lads, shouting, screaming, and laughing all at once; and oh, far out in the water, crouching down in the very middle of an old basket-lid, mewing piteously, and half frozen, was the dear, helpless little kitten!

The cat fell sheer off the dog's back in her ungovernable terror.

One, two—dash through the startled boys—three—splash into the water, and off!

'Hallo!' some of them cried, 'what's that? A dog?'

Yes, a dog! making his way swiftly and steadily through the icy water, straight for the basket-lid, nothing but his beautiful black head to be seen, with its kindly, bright eyes, and its snorting, eager nostrils. 'Hold on, little kitten!' they seemed to say as plainly as words could speak. 'Hold on, little kitten; I'm coming—I'm coming!'

A shower of stones, of course, from the land. Some of them hit him, and some didn't. What of either?

The current—for the water was broad, deep, and long enough to possess a current—the current, then, took the unsteady little craft farther out every minute; and the old pocket-handkerchief, rigged taut between two upright sticks on purpose, served very well as a sail and helped to make good progress. The dog pushed on.

If that little vessel went much farther out, he should have to convey that new-born kitten back to land through far more cold water than might be safe for its little life,—new-born kittens being very tender atoms, and the water almost numbing in its coldness for even he himself, who was a great, strong, full-grown dog.

Meanwhile the half-distracted little kitten began to lose its head. It had never seen Scout before. Its experience of dogs had been limited to its acquaint-

ance with purblind, torpid old Woolly. How was it to know that the big panting creature with the great shining eyes, that was gaining so fast upon it, was a friend—the truest, noblest, most disinterested of friends?

The nearer the help came, the more terrified it became. Starting up in despair, it ran wildly, blindly, round and round its unsteady little vessel. Ooze through the wicker-work came the chill dark water, slop-slopping, till it quite reached to her shivering little paws; and then, true to her instinct, she clutched frantically at one of the tottering masts and tried to run up it out of the wet.

'Hold on, hold on!' gasped Scout, throwing all his strength and all his will into his work.

Alas! too late. Down came mast, sail, kitten and all, souse into the cruel water.

The boat dipped sideways, but righted itself in a moment. The handkerchief-sail floated away; so did the masts. But where was the struggling kitten?

Never mind where, for wherever it was, it only stayed there just during that twinkling of an eye that it took Scout to kick up his black heels, to dip his black head, and to plunge after it.

And the next thing that was to be seen was a dog making steadily and swiftly for the land again; a draggled little kitten in his mouth, with its head held

high and dry, and only its helpless hind-legs and its limp little tail hanging in the water.

The kitten was not going to be drowned that time! Not one of the hard-hearted little boys stirred hand or foot as the great dripping black dog walked quietly out of the water, and laid his burden gently on the ground, licking it carefully, and sniffing kindly at it, before he even thought of shaking some of the water from his coat.

They were only thoughtless boys after all, not wicked; and the dog had read them a lesson that had shamed them and sobered them.

Besides that, if Scout could have seen anything very clearly just then, he would have seen that the boys were not alone now. He would have seen a little girl with fat legs and arms, and a face red with crying; and a tall lady, and a nurse, in whose arms lay the exhausted and fainting white cat! But he was a little numbed with the cold, and blinded with the water in his eyes, and he saw nothing at first. Only, if he couldn't see, he could hear; and very welcome to his brave dog's heart were the hearty words,—

'Good dog! Fine fellow! Brave old boy!'

'Oh, oh! oo darling big black dog, I love oo!'

'Take care, Miss Flossy,' cried the nurse.

Such a shake! such a shower of water right and

left! and then he saw around him. And it was, if ever, certainly his turn to feel discouraged. The cat was a prisoner, the kitten was recaptured, and everything would have to be begun over again. After that it mattered very little to him that one of the elder people read what was written on his leather collar—'Scout, Grey House Park, Edmonstone;' and on the cat's little red leather collar too—'Pussy, The Laurels, Edmonstone,' though there was quite a commotion when the names were read. 'The Laurels! why, this must be Kittikens' mamma!' cried Flossy's mamma; 'and that's why she ran away with the kitten, then!'

'Dear me! bless me! good gracious!' cried everybody else crowding round the little white cat. 'And she's come after her kitten all the way from Edmonstone! See how thin she is, and how draggled her fur is, and how footsore her poor little paws are! Oh, poor dear, poor loving little thing! Just fancy, Flossy, here's a little mother come twenty-five miles after her baby since yesterday morning, when your kitten came on the top of the coach in a hamper, all through that deep snow and cold night air, while you and I and the little kitten were comfortably in bed, and fast asleep. Oh, Flossy, how she must love her little child!'

Flossy's nose began to pucker.

'Tell me, Flossy. It would go against my heart to lose you, and you wouldn't like to lose me, would you?'

Flossy understood. The tears grew bigger and bigger, till there wasn't any more room for them in her poor little eyes; and down they came tumbling over her nose, sliding over her cheeks, drop-dropping on her little hood-strings and her little warm velvet coat.

'Flossy shall decide for herself; but as for me, I should like to make the poor old cat's heart glad again. Flossy has so many pets; the cat has only this one. Flossy will try and remember the Sunday story about the poor man's ewe lamb.'

Flossy never hesitated after this. She just cleared her choking little throat and blinked and winked away her tears, and said firmly,—

'Kittikens muss doe home with her ma!'

And so she did the very next day, in a hamper with some bread and milk at the bottom of it,—never, never to be divided from that faithful, loving heart, that loved her better, far better, than all the kind little boys and girls in the whole world.

Meanwhile, when Flossy's mamma had dried her own little kitten's tears, she turned to look for the dog.

But the dog was gone! He had just waited to hear the decision of Flossy and her mamma respecting the cat and the kitten, and then—

'Oh! it's plain to see,
I may go!' said he,
'There's nothing further to do,' said he;
'So homeward I'll scamper,
While they in a hamper
May follow with little Jack-Nag,' said he.
'If I stand about here,
I shall catch cold, I fear,
And my coat will soon dry if I run,' said he.
'Besides, there is this!
If that chicken they miss,
Well—I'd better be out of the way!' said he.

Is there anything more to say about the cat, the kitten, and the dog? Nothing; except that they lived happy ever afterwards, united in the firmest bonds of friendship; and that the very first time the cat saw the dog after their return home, she took him to a hole in the 'Laurels'' kitchen garden, and showed him as fine a collection of chicken gizzards and livers, and rabbits' heads and tails, and savoury partridge backbones, as ever gladdened dog or cat's eye.

'There,' said she falteringly; 'it is but very little that I can offer.'

'But I don't want to be paid!' cried Scout, more touched than he could well say. 'Dogs, you'll find, Mistress Pussy, don't give services for the sake of the reward; and upon my word, after all, I liked the fun of it all.'

'Yes, yes; perhaps you like the icy cold bath you took, and the boys throwing stones, and the short allowance of food that you got during so many night hours out in the cold!' cried the cat enthusiastically. 'Don't tell me! You are the noblest, most generous, most devoted of animals; and you don't for a moment imagine that I am trying to pay for such help as you generously gave me in my trouble with a few mouthfuls of food? No! Services like yours never are, never could be paid for. But there! my life is at your service whenever you think you might want it; but you may as well eat this little bit of lunch now you are here.'

'True,' said the dog, who had his mouth full already. 'And such a lunch, too! We've three lap-dogs, and some white cats, and canaries, and a parrot at home; so it's very few delicate tit-bits that fall to my share,' continued he, crunch-crunching with great relish.

Presently said the cat timidly, 'Might I—I heard —did they—what did they say to you when you reached home that—that day?'

There was no answer. Scout went on crunch-crunching to the very end of the delicacies, and when he had finished he licked his lips for a minute or two in silence.

'Well,' said he at length, 'they—they didn't *say* much. They asked where I'd been all night and day, and led me to understand'—

'Well, yes?' said the cat.

'Well, they led me to understand that—that, in short, I had better not go wandering about at night for the future. They—they used some forcible arguments; but—but I feel more comfortable about my back than I did at first, and so—no matter!'

The little cat melted into tears. 'And you—you were punished!' cried she. 'Generous, valiant Scout! you who deserved it so little!'

'H'm,' said the dog, with a little hesitating cough. 'The least said about not deserving it the better. How about the young and innocent chicken that I snatched from under its poor mother's wing?'

IV.

TWO LITTLE PRISONERS.

TWO LITTLE PRISONERS.

TWO parent birds and three newly-fledged children birds huddled sleepily together in their snug little nest at about five o'clock in the morning of what promised to be a fine October day. Presently one of the branches overhead gave a sudden and unexpected lurch downwards, and a voice called out, 'Get up, get up! I've something to say to you.'

'Go and say it on a steadier twig, then! You've sent the dew-drops right into my eye, and it makes me feel quite giddy to see you swaying up and down within an inch of us all. Look at you, now! You're scattering a perfect shower of dew-drops about you at this very minute. Well, you were going to say'—

But the early bird that had spoken first was in far too high feather to be put out by any amount of crossness.

'I'm so delighted myself,' said she joyously, 'that I want everybody to be glad too. My daughter is going to be married!'

'Dear me! as if everybody along the whole avenue didn't know all about that. And if you're delighted that she's going to marry that pert young fellow with the absurd red shirt-front, why, then, you must be easily delighted, that's all.'

The old linnet waited a bit before she answered, pecking leisurely at a few refractory feathers that did not lie smooth enough to please her.

'Ah!' said she presently, 'that red shirt-front is not in good taste, is it? The linnets are such quiet dressers, that I never could think how it was that my daughter, who has been very elegantly brought up, should have taken a fancy to such a bad style of bird. However, all that is over now, and done

with for ever. My dear child was proposed for last evening by a very great personage indeed—a foreigner of very great distinction, who has made our beloved country his permanent home. He lives in a splendid golden house not far from here, and has a very large retinue of servants. The—the luxury, I may say, in which he lives is—is remarkable. Every morning a special attendant cleans out and arranges the drawing and dining-rooms. The bed-rooms, which are entirely composed of the finest smooth wood, just large enough for him to grasp comfortably without stretching his claws, are well scraped with a blunt knife made on purpose, and are then well scalded in hot water. His repasts, which are regularly served at appointed hours, are composed of the finest seeds. The water he drinks is kept in a magnificent crystal vessel with a rusty nail in it, which, as you are aware, is a great mark of distinction; and the early salads he is furnished with, and the foreign delicacies he is tempted with, are really something that baffle description. Then, when the weather is cold, he has his house transported for him to warm climates; and when the weather is bright and sunny, he gives orders to be placed against that grey stone wall yonder, with the Virginia creeper running up it. Indeed, it was sitting on those very branches that I and my Linnetta first made his ac-

quaintance. Yes, I am indeed a happy mother; for, though we are of very good family too, in common justice I must give the palm in the way of good looks to my daughter's future husband. The brilliancy of his eye and the lovely golden hue of his coat are beyond a doubt superior to anything I have ever seen before.'

Here the old linnet stopped for want of breath, and the other birds in the nest felt too overpowered for a moment or so to venture any remark. Presently, however, one of the fledglings hazarded a tiny pipe,—

'But Linnetta chirps so sweetly.'

'Yes, my love, she does; but what is her feeble little effort compared to the mellifluous flow of sound that emanates from the throat of her future husband?'

'And where are they to live?—are we to lose Linnetta?' asked another fledgling anxiously.

'It is not decided. The canary—did I tell you he was a canary? No! Well, then, he wishes, very naturally, for her to return with him to his golden palace; but she, dear silly child, would prefer to remain in this gloomy old avenue. We must try to convince her of the absurdity of the idea. Well, I must be off. I only looked in to tell you about the marriage, and to invite you all to the wedding. The children must come too, mind; for it's likely to be

a very fine affair, and it will be something for them to remember when they're grown up.'

And the old linnet flew away amid a general chorus of hearty acceptance.

'I feel rather nervous,' said the canary, drawing his bill sharply across the wires of his cage to attract the sleepy old grey parrot's attention.

The parrot raised one leaden-coloured eyelid: 'I should think so! You'll have a fine day, though, I fancy. Only the fine days at this time of the year don't last.'

'I shall be back early. Suppose after all that they don't let me out for my usual morning fly about the room!'

'You've only to flutter about a bit, and get in a rage, and peck at the wires. You know they always let you out then—even if they have forgotten you.'

But they didn't forget. At the proper hour the cage was cleaned and fresh food was given, and presently the cage door was set open, and the canary took his first step.

'Don't be in too great a hurry. Wander about a bit as usual,' whispered the parrot as the canary fluttered past him.

Presently the somebody who was busy with the empty cage called out to somebody else,—

'You may set the door open a little. It's very close in here, and Dickey never tries to fly away.'

The door was set open. Confiding somebodies!

'Now's your time,' said the parrot. 'Make straight for the second floor. The housemaid is making the beds, and the windows will be wide open!'

Wh-r-r-r!

'What's that?—not Dickey, surely? Why, it is Dickey!'

Out rushed the somebody into the hall, calling out loudly,—

'Shut the windows up-stairs!—shut the windows!'

And then there was a somebody came rushing down-stairs—'Oh! please—please, have you got the canary safe? There was a bird just now flew right past me, and out of the window up-stairs!'

The wedding was celebrated in the favourite old tree of the linnet and her daughter. After all it was not a grand affair by any means. The bride was not looking her best. Her heart still clung with painful fidelity to the remembrance of the bright young robin who had won her fledgling heart; and the thought of leaving the old linnet, too, was very distressing to her. She grieved, too, for the well-loved old trees, the sweet-smelling flowers, the fresh country air, and the blue sky,—all the modest little joys that were to be hers no

longer! And she wondered sadly why it was that the canary should wish to take so unwilling a bride to his splendid home.

The canary's object, however, was very evident to everybody else. He knew that in marrying Linnetta he would obtain the most patient, obedient, sweet-voiced, gentle little companion in the world; and as he was an intensely self-occupied creature, he did not wait to inquire if it were agreeable to herself or not.

It is true that the nestful of sparrows were there, and several other friends; and that there was a delicious cold collation of the most delicate grubs and worms imaginable. But there was no life in the entertainment; and though the weather was bright, the canary was cold, and stood, huddled up and sulky, in the thickest part of the tree, fretting and fuming at the unconscionable time the young linnet was taking about her 'adieux.' He was anxious to fly home again to warmer climates, and he was very, very anxious to learn what sort of a reception his homely little brown bird would get from his powerful friends.

It would be just as good, his return to them with her, as saying,—

'You wanted me to marry that horrible young termagant who lives in the brown wood cage in the schoolroom; but, as she nearly killed her first husband,

it appears, I've decided to have my own way, and I've brought home a bride of my own choosing.'

At the mere thought of what they might say to all this, the shivering canary gave an extra shiver.

'Don't be impatient. The sun isn't going behind the house yet for some time, and Linnetta will be here directly. She's only saying "good-bye" to some old friends,' said the old linnet, with one claw to her eyes.

Poor little Linnetta! She hopped from bough to bough, and from twig to twig, with a bursting heart.

She kissed her favourite leaves one by one, and she looked with full eyes for the last time at her favourite views. And as she laid her little brown head wearily against the rough trunk of the tree, she thought that surely, surely it could not be that she should never come back to it all again *one* day, however far off that day might be. And when she had said good-bye to the great crooked branch, in a fork of which her mother's nest had been made, and where she herself had lain so snugly and so safely when she was nothing but a little, helpless, fragile egg, she was ready to go.

And she and the canary spread their wings and flew away together towards the great grey stone house which was their future home.

The drawing-room windows, the dining-room windows, in fact nearly every window in the house was set wide open. There should be plenty of means of ingress for the truant Dickey, were he minded to come back to them.

'Come along,' said the canary; 'there's no one there. We'll be safe in my gold house before you can say "tweat!" See, they have actually put bits of sponge-cake and sugar all along the window-sill. Fond creatures! they can't live without me.'

But the linnet hung back trembling.

'Oh, oh! I'm so frightened,' said she.

'Nonsense; frightened? And pray, of what? Am I not here to protect you?'

'Yes; but—oh, there's a face at the window,' whispered she.

'Up-stairs; not where we are going.'

'Oh yes; but isn't that a great cruel cat?'

'Where? I don't see one. Perhaps you mean the parrot. Come, come, Mistress Canary; I shall be angry if you don't come on a little quicker. Why, good gracious me, they might actually come and shut the window in our very faces, and then we should have to stay outside in the cold all night, or else go back to your stupid old tree.'

'I only wish they would, then,' sighed the linnet.

'Isn't—isn't that a pop-gun there on the window-sill?'

'What's a pop-gun? How vulgar you are, little linnet. We know nothing of bird-traps in our station of life. Come, come; in you go!'

So saying, having lost his patience, sad to relate, he flew at his terrified little bride, and literally drove her before him with wide-open, angry beak, through the open window; when pounce!—out sprang a treacherous creature from behind the window-curtains, and bang!—down went the window.

'Caught, caught! you naughty Dickey, you! Where have you been, sir, all this long while—eh?'

Dickey, startled out of his life (for he was himself easily alarmed, for all his bouncing manners), made straight for the sanctuary of his cage, never once giving a thought to the far more terrified Linnetta; and no sooner had he fluttered, panting with emotion, to the topmost perch, when—snap went the cage door!

He was once more a prisoner in his own house.

No one paid any attention to the little brown bird, that had fled with a beating heart and fast-flapping wings to the back of an easy-chair, where it caught its little wild untrimmed claws in the meshes of a woollen antimacassar, and lay struggling and terrified.

The only thing the somebody behind the curtain had seen had been the long-looked-for bright yellow Dickey's swift flight home again. And indeed that was the only fact anybody seemed to care for, for by and by pretty nearly the whole household came trooping in to admire and scold, and caress and wonder, all in a breath! Never had there been such a naughty little bird, but, at the same time, never had there been such a dear, affectionate little creature. How naughty to fly away! How clever to come back! How sagacious to go to his cage at once! How cunning to come to the right room! How pretty! how bold! how tender-hearted! how interesting! In fact, more miscellaneous epithets were lavished on him than one person could possibly think of at once, for there were many persons there to lavish them, and all were equally enthusiastic. Meanwhile the object of all this attention sat on his perch, silent and sullen, nothing moving about him save his expressive little black eyes. To tell the truth, he was rather taken aback at the horrible dilemma in which he had placed poor little Linnetta. Presently some one cried,—

'Why, see here! Here's another bird! a common little brown bird on the back of this chair.'

'So there is! Why, then, perhaps that was the very

little bird that Dickey was fighting with outside, when I hid myself behind the window-curtain. Take care, children; it's going to fly!'

So she was, — only, blinded by terror, she couldn't see very well where she was going; her head swam, a thick mist came before her eyes; her little wings, half spread out, fell to her beating sides.

'I've got her—I've got her!' cried a triumphant voice. 'She's too young to fly far.'

'Give her to me.'

'Let her alone.'

'I shan't.'

'You shall.'

'Let go.'

'Go away.'

'You mustn't.'

'I will.'

'Children!' cried a voice of command, 'cease quarrelling this minute, or I shall be obliged to knock all your naughty little heads together. Don't you see that you'll squeeze the poor little thing to death among you all? Give her to me this very minute!' And at last, after having been bandied about from eager hot hand to eager hot hand, the poor little bird found herself lying in one that was larger, softer, and more gentle than all the rest.

'See how its little heart beats! How frightened it is! How would you like to be fingered about by an enormous giant a thousand times taller and fatter than yourselves? Shall we give it its liberty—eh, children? what do you say?'

Oh, how the little linnet's heart beat just then! And if any one had glanced up at the gold cage, they might have seen the canary listening very intently, with his little head on one side. The children, however, found it very difficult to part with the dear little brown bird, that had flown so lovingly right into their very arms.

'Ma! I think it wants to stay with us.'

'Ma! I think its wings are broken.'

'Ma! isn't it too little to live all by itself?'

'Ma! it must be getting very cold out of doors now for a little bird.'

Ma considered for a moment.

'If you like to make it a present to poor little invalid Neddy, and take it to him the next time we drive into town, you may keep it, children,' said she presently. And the children shouted with delight at the permission.

Sentence was given. The poor little bird was doomed. Oh, could they but have known of the anguish that filled her heart, surely their own would have been too full of pity to have kept her from her

own home in the old avenue one single moment longer! But they did not think of that. They put her in a tidy, small wooden cage painted green, and gave her food, water, and perches. They even gave her a rusty nail; but she cared little for this last empty honour, and lay ruffled up and motionless on the sand at the bottom of the cage for the rest of the evening, and all through the long, dreary night. And the first time the family drove into town (which was ten miles distant), they took the little bird with them, with a white pocket-handkerchief thrown over the cage, that the fresh sweet air she loved so well should not come too directly upon her. They did not know how much she would have given to have taken just one last look at the great waving trees, and the wide brown fields, as she passed through them for the last time. And she was given to little orphan Neddy, who lay on his back night and day, for week after week and month after month, sometimes awake, sometimes asleep, very often in great pain, but always gentle and patient. So often alone, too (for Neddy's friends were very poor people, who were away nearly all the day long at their work), that when his visitors had toiled up three flights of crooked stairs to see him, and placed the little cage on his bed, saying, 'Neddy, we have brought you a little bird to keep you company,' the tears sprang to his eyes for very

pleasure, and he clasped his wasted little hands tightly together, and said, scarcely above his breath,—

'Oh! oh my!'

Yes; the little linnet's happy days were all counted. She knew that. To live for evermore in that narrow little cage, in that close little room, within sight only of some black geraniums that might once have been red, and two or three grimy rows of chimney-pots that actually shut out all the colour of the sky, if they did not shut out all the light of it, was her fate. A sad fate indeed for the little country-bred linnet; and no wonder that the child, though he thought her the loveliest bird that had ever existed, grieved a little over her want of spirits and of appetite, and her total silence.

But the linnet's heart was one of the tenderest, truest, loving hearts in the world. And when she saw how sadly the little lad suffered, how desolate was his little life, how little he had to look forward to, and how patiently he bore his many afflictions, her heart warmed within her, and she thought to herself that she was not after all the only one to be pitied, and that perhaps if she told him a little of her own sad story, he might forget his own sorrows for a while in listening to hers.

So she cleared her humble little throat, and began

timidly, — 'Twe — twe, tchiu — tchiu — tchiu, t-r-r-r— t-r-r-r!' and then stopped short, almost frightened at the sound of her own voice.

The ailing child said nothing, but he raised himself on his little elbow, and looked up into the cage very earnestly, holding his breath lest he might interrupt her.

So the little bird took courage and went on again.

It wasn't a loud or a brilliant song. It scarcely was a song at all. It was more like a few sweet, careless, caressing notes strung loosely together. But it was low, and very soothing, like the idle murmuring of a little brook; and Neddy's eyes closed involuntarily.

She poured out all her troubles. She told him of all she had loved so well, and lost. She sang to him about the waving green trees, and the fresh country lanes, and the sweet wild flowers. Of the delicious country air, of the glorious, warm sun, and the myriads of twinkling stars, one brighter than the other. Of the great gliding rivers, and the frolicsome baby rivulets. Of the forked bough where she was born, too; and of the broken-hearted little robin that had loved her so truly; and of the dear old linnet-mother who had been so mistaken in her loving wish for her child's happiness.

But here she broke down. A great lump came into her little ruffled throat. She could sing no more.

And there was silence, oh! such a dead silence, in the little darkening room, while Neddy lay back with still, closed eyes; and if ever a bird smiled, surely the little linnet smiled then, as she thought how all her pitiful complainings had lulled him to sleep only!

After that, seeing that her song had been so successful, she sang every day, and sometimes nearly all day, only a few sweet notes at a time; and, having but one story to relate, relating it over and over again. Thinking it strange, too, that the little human ears, that seemed to hear it so gladly, should be so slow of comprehension; for when she had finished her little murmuring complainings, Neddy never said, 'Poor bird!'

But the little linnet did not blame him for that. There was no bitterness in her little heart as she sang her pretty lullabys to him; and Neddy, seeing her so contented, forgot that her wings were not broken as were his own; and that, unlike him, she had but to fly away across those black chimney-pots to find her mother and her little brothers and sisters, and her dear green lanes again.

By and by, as the year strengthened, the child

weakened; and one bright spring morning, when there were people gathered round the little bed, and he lay so white and so still that one could scarcely tell whether he still lived or not, the linnet's heart was so sorry, and she was so anxious to do something for her suffering little friend, that she began to sing her very best and her loudest.

'Hush!' said somebody. 'Cover the cage over. Take the bird away.'

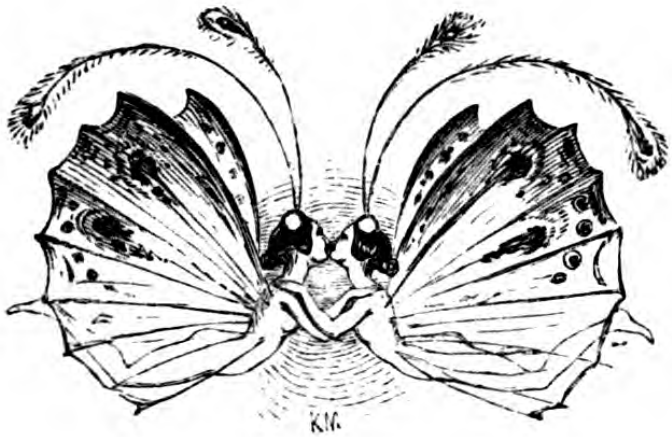
But, though it was only said in a whisper, Neddy heard it, and he opened his eyes and smiled faintly.

So the linnet was suffered to go on singing. Oh, how she poured her whole loving soul into that last song that Neddy was to hear! It was the same old story she was telling—she knew no other: the gentle little complainings of one prisoner to another.

And while she sang, the weary child's soul took its flight to where there are yet greener trees and lovelier flowers than even the little brown linnet knew of. The little boy-prisoner was free!

By and by they set the cage at the open window and opened the door, and the wondering bird hopped gently out on to the house-tops, in the fresh spring air.

'Fly away, little bird!' said they. 'Neddy wished it.' And so the little bird-prisoner was free too, and flew away with a full heart to her mammy, and her beloved green trees.



V.

JACK WITH THE FISHES

JACK WITH THE FISHES.

PERHAPS you have noticed how oddly people's boots behave in boats sometimes. The boots belonging to the people who are rowing, that is. There they will be, calm, inoffensive pieces of bootmanship enough, and your eyes may be resting on them quietly—boots being prominent features in a row-boat — when, gracious!—there they are wildly flourishing their heels in the air, within an inch or so of your startled, alarmed nose!

Sometimes that is because their owner has not put his oar deep enough in the water to get a firm hold of it, but very often it is only the little river-sprites at their mischief. Only they very rarely swim under a person's oar, and tip it up in that rude manner, unless that person has been boasting.

But they are up to worse tricks than that. Sometimes, when you are in a great hurry to land, and you think you have brought your boat nicely alongside the bank, they'll swarm round on the other side of her in great clusters, and pull her, sweep!—stern foremost out into the current again; and there will you be, sprawling at the bottom of the boat, with a handful of stinging nettles and wet earth grasped tightly in your hand.

And sometimes, when people are learning to row, they'll hang on to the oars in dozens and dozens, and make them feel so heavy that you can hardly lift them; and the very next minute they'll creep under them and bear them up on their tiny shoulders, and make them feel so light that it seems as if all your strength wouldn't prevent the water and the wind from carrying them just wherever they liked.

And what makes those long-bodied, six-legged, spidery-looking creatures that skim the surface of the water as easily as though it were so much glass,—what do you think is it that makes them start and dart

about so suddenly and so violently every now and then for no apparent reason whatever? It is only because the river-sprites jump unexpectedly on to their backs, and tease and push and beat them so unmercifully sometimes, that they take so suddenly to their six heels. Nothing but that.

Jack was fishing, and sad pranks they played with him. They pulled the bait off his hook, and tied long slimy bits of weed to it instead. They stuck it so tight into the ground that he couldn't get it out, until—bang!—the line gave way, and flew into the air and got caught in the trees. And they would pull that float of his down under water, and imitate so exactly the nibble of fishes, that Jack was in one perpetual fever of alternate hope and disappointment.

Presently, just before Jack's very eyes, bounce!—up jumped a huge fish curled up like a fried whiting; splash!—back it fell into the water before you could gasp out 'Oh!' leaving a numberless quantity of rippling water-rings, running one into the other in a bewilderingly pretty way, just to mark the spot where it jumped.

Jack quite forgot that one must never lean over the side of a boat. In his anxiety to ascertain if he could still see that great blue-black fish swimming about

under water, he did lean over—farther and farther still, until his inquisitive little nose almost touched the water itself.

The river-sprites were waiting their opportunity. Once more, before he could gasp out 'Oh!' they caught him by that same foolish nose of his—up went his boots in the air—souse into the water he went, and disappeared, leaving, if that was any consolation to him, a much larger set of rippling rings than even the large blue-black fish had done.

There was a fine scamper among the minnows and sticklebacks. Jack had the bottom of the river to himself for a few minutes.

'I—beg—your pardon,' gasped he, as he lay flat on his back on the softest bed of mud that could possibly be imagined.

Nobody answered, for the good reason that nobody heard.

Presently a minnow bolder than the rest whisked itself back, and came sniffing round. Then two—three—four; then twenty; then five twenties—minnows being remarkably inquisitive fish.

'I think I'll go home; it's very damp down here,' said Jack feebly. 'And I've got my new cravat on.'

'Surely not till you've seen the carp! Everybody

pays a visit to the carp—he is about two hundred years old!'

'Is he indeed?' said Jack. 'He must be older than papa; but as it's nearly time for me to have my tea, and we're to have fried gudg'—

Here he was suddenly interrupted by an old minnow.

'A proper regard for the feelings of others is one of the brightest gems in a young person's crown, ahem! Would you like to go to a wedding? There's a sweet young perch who is about to be married to-day. She marries beneath her; he is only a barbel, but he is very devoted and attentive. And I daresay he would show *you* some little attention if you made it worth his while. There he is, sitting in that corner.'

This was a figure of speech. The barbel was not sitting, he was lying curled up in a bed of weeds, smoothing down his beard with one of his fins. He looked pensive and bored.

'Come along!' said he, uncurling himself slowly, and gaping. 'I'll take you to see the carp, if you like. What have you got in your pockets, though?'

'Oh—in my pockets? A knife, with two large and two small blades, a gimlet, a cork-screw, a thing to pull stones out of horses' feet with, and a nail-cleaner.'

'Ah! What else?'

'An' a piece of string, an'—an' a farthing.'

'Ah! What else?'

'Oh, a pencil case, an' a bit of cocoa-nut, an' a girl's thimble, an' a bit of sealing-wax, and my pocket-book, an'—an' a biggish nail, an'—an' a marble.'

'Ah! Anything more?'

'Only crumbs,' said Jack, apologizing as it were.

'Just hand me over the bit of cocoa-nut and the crumbs. Thank you! Very delicious indeed they are! You may keep the other things for the present. This way. Can you swim, by the bye?'

'Not when I'm in the water.'

'Oh! Then when *can* you swim?' asked the barbel flippantly.

'When I'm on the top of the water,' said Jack, smiling. 'Now, then, who's the stupid now?'

'Neither of us,' said the barbel good-temperedly. 'Catch hold of my left fin. Not my tail, boy! Good gracious! that's what I steer with. Away we go!'

And away they went. The carp lived some distance off, at the bottom of a deep, rushing pool, amid the piles of an old, long-disused landing-stage. A solitary, darksome place enough.

'Mind,' said the barbel as they approached it, 'you're not to expect any frivolous kind of amusement down here!'

'I won't,' said Jack, shivering. 'It's very interesting,

I daresay; but are you sure I shall get home in time for tea? It's nearly tea-time now, and we're to have fr'—

This time, however, he didn't get even so far as 'fried gudg—.'

'Don't hesitate, pray!' said the barbel. 'You mustn't talk of fried gudgeons before a company of minnows, of course; but before me, what can it matter? S-sh —s-sh! Here we are. There's the carp; do you see him? Did you ever see anything so grand?'

Jack had to look twice before he saw him at all, the water rushed by so fiercely and yet so thickly. When he did see him, however, he thought that he looked fat and stupid. But there was a rapt expression of unfeigned admiration on the barbel's face, that warned him to keep his opinion to himself.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' said the carp, speaking rather thickly and huskily, but with an air of the most absolute indifference. 'I measure two feet two inches three quarters and half a barley-corn round the waist, and am no less than three feet five inches long. My fins are six inches in length; and I weigh thirty-seven pounds. You will please observe the curious and remarkable scab which adheres to my scales, which is a sign of great antiquity. And you will admire the beautiful brass ring which I wear in my nose, and which was

placed there by order of His Britannic Majesty of revered memory, King Julius Cæsar, Emperor of Putney, in the year 2. I was born in the year 25, and am totally blind of one eye. I drink no wine or spirits of any kind, and enjoy tolerably good health. I must have had a numerous family, but don't know where they are now, any of them! and any little trifle you may be willing to bestow upon an old favourite of the public will be thankfully received, etc. etc.'

Here the carp stopped suddenly short, and relapsed into his former state of silence and stupidity.

'He expects something,' whispered the barbel.

'Will the bit of sealing-wax do? or the farthing, or what?'

'Can you spare him the nail too? and the thimble? Nothing comes amiss. He has a very remarkable collection of offerings, I can assure you; and some day you may be glad to think that you had been enabled to add to it!' While this discussion was going on the carp had gone to sleep, but hearing voices he woke up again, and began—

'Good morning, gentlemen! I measure two feet two inches three quarters and a half barley'—

'All right! Same party still!' said the barbel promptly.

'That's all I have about me just now,' said Jack, as he offered his miscellaneous collection of trifles.

'Thank you kindly, gentlemen; for I have a sick child and seven little hungry wives at home.'

'Now let us go and get married to my perch!—I mean me. We're not far from where she lives. Only you must remember not to speak about brown bread and butter before her. There's a horrible fate which may befall a perch. It's called — whisper, please — souchy!'

'And then may I go home to my tea?'

'You're a goose! Wasn't I just telling you not to mention brown bread and butter! Ouf! What a relief it is to get into the full of the stream again! Can you imagine anything prettier than those rushes to your left? We're getting near to where my perch lives.'

'Please'—

'Well?'

'Oh, I was only going to ask—is she any relation to gutta percha?'

'Closely related,' said the barbel promptly, not wishing to appear ignorant.

'Then she must be related to my goloshes too, mustn't she?'

'I daresay she is,' said the barbel. 'Of course I can't

be expected to know the name of every fish that's afloat!'

'And the garden-hose? and the trellis-like door-mat, that feels as if you were walking on muffin and crumpet?' said Jack excitedly.

'Very likely; they'll be a foreign branch of the family,' said the barbel carelessly. 'I shouldn't mention them to her, though. There have been little differences between them of late.'

Jack promised that he would be discreet.

'How the water tickles and trickles down one's back! and how fast we go!' said he, shuddering.

'Yes; there's a pretty tidy current running just here, between the piles of this old wooden bridge of ours. The wood they are made of is very old and valuable, I'm told. And it's so pleasant and convenient. You can lie as snug as possible, in still water, on the down side of the piles; or you can shift your quarters to the up side, and get the stream full in your face. It's a decidedly eligible spot to live in. — But here's the wedding-party already assembled. We're not a bit too early. You shall give the bride away, because you're a stranger! Only you'll have to come down handsomely in the way of presents in that case!'

'But where's the wedding-cake?' cried Jack aghast.

'He couldn't come. He has the rheumatism in his fins.'

Jack was beginning to explain that a wedding-cake wasn't a fish, when the sudden appearance of a fifteen-pound pike, with his mouth wide open, put the thought out of his head.

'Glad to see you!' said the pike. 'Take a gudgeon? It's just the season. No? Not even a minnow? No? So you are to give away the bride! Where are your wedding presents, then? What have you brought with you?'

'Only a pocket-knife with two blades, and a gimlet, and a'—

'All right! I know the kind of thing. An ancestor of mine swallowed one once. If you've nothing else to offer, they must make that do.'

It was a very confused wedding. The fish came in quantities.

Plenty of hungry pike, of course; bright-eyed, sturdy-looking roach, in shoals; slender dace; brilliant scaly perch; bream, chubb, and barbel in plenty. Nor were the small, silvery, elegantly-shaped minnows wanting (the pike were supposed to be on their best behaviour for that occasion); or the short, pert little sticklebacks; and there were even a few spotted trout, who would

undoubtedly have been elegant additions to the society, had they not given themselves so many airs.

And Jack was pushed about, here, there, and everywhere; and went rolling and tumbling about, in between the wooden piles of the bridge, in the swift-running water, till he became quite confused, and was really much astonished when the perch's mamma, a stumpy old lady, said,—

'Now the wedding is over, let us each tell a story about something that has happened to us in days gone by. That will be a pleasant and an instructive way of passing the afternoon. Shall I begin, just to encourage the rest?'

There was an enthusiastic splashing about of fins and tails; the water was white with foam; and the perch, much gratified, proceeded to tell her story.

'Shall I tell you of my wonderful escape from death when young and nimble? Your kind splashing says, Yes; and gladly will I comply with your wishes. At the time I speak of, I don't believe I can have weighed more than a couple of ounces, so young and innocent was I! One day, while taking my midday meal, I suddenly felt a most violent pain in my mouth, and the moment after I was jerked violently into the air! A fearful monster seized roughly hold of me; I experienced a second frightful wrench in my mouth; and then

Jack listening to the perchs' story.—*Page* 132.

I was brutally thrown on to some dreadfully dry grass a few yards off, and left to myself. I need scarcely tell what was the fate that lay before me. The agony of body I endured was, however, scarcely to be compared to the agony of mind I suffered. Thus cruelly snatched from my beloved parents and little brothers and sisters, who were feeding with me at the time, I already saw before me, in my mind's eye, my loved ones writhing on the grass in torture also. My one thought was—escape! Not escape for myself, but escape in order that I might be enabled to save my dear family from the awful fate with which I myself was now threatened. The monster was not watching me. He stood at a little distance from me, his back turned towards me; and I thought if I could only get strength enough to jump, a series of small jumps in the right direction would bring me to the water's edge. Without reflecting further, I gathered myself together, and jumped. Alas! too high. Down I fell almost in the same place, with a frightful thump, and totally exhausted; and the fearful monster came rushing furiously at me, and picking me up with three or four horrible pink flippers with hard scales at the tips, threw me fiercely still farther away from the water's edge. I had not lost all courage, however. The moment his back was turned, I jumped again; this time so gently, that I assure you I scarcely moved the

little dry weeds on which I lay. One jump, two jumps—oh, how fatiguing it was!—three jumps, four; when, horrible to relate, a dog, who I suppose had been set to watch me, came bounding and snorting and snapping towards me, with wide-open jaws and glaring eyes, and though he didn't touch me, lay down, his nose on his paws, within an inch of where I lay panting and dying. I must confess that here my heart failed me entirely. I gave myself up for lost, and bade, mentally, a long farewell to all I loved. My heart beat so that I could almost hear it; my head throbbed almost to bursting; a film grew over my eyes; when all at once I heard a most mysterious buzzing, booming noise close to me, and almost at the same time a kind little voice saying in my ear,—

'"You're not a flower, or a vegetable; and you're not a stone, because you smell of something strong. But of what, I wonder? Is it water and weeds? Yes; rushes, I think. How odd! I never saw you before, and yet you look as if you might be of some use to something, somewhere. You're a dreadfully vague thing! Do tell me who you are."

'"Only a little dying fish," gasped I. "I know you well. I often see you hovering about those dear little blue flowers that grow close to the river's edge, down by the wooden bridge. You're a bee."

'"Right; I am. And you mean my forget-me-nots. Poor little fish! Can I help you in any way?"

'I explained what my plans for escape had been,—or rather, I was about to explain, when the bee, who was a remarkably intelligent creature, interrupted me.

'"I see! I understand. I'll settle the dog's business. Only, mind you always jump when he does. Watch your time, and keep a cool head."

'The bee flew away without waiting to be thanked; and very shortly I saw what her plan for my rescue was.

'She settled first on the dog's ear; and he, being smooth-skinned, felt her tickle it. Round he turned upon her, with a growl and a snap. In the same moment up flew the bee, and I jumped—certainly a full quarter of a yard nearer the river than before, and then lay as still as possible.

'Quick as lightning, before the dog had time to notice the widening of the space between himself and me, back came the bee, with a loud buzz and swoop, into his very eyes.

'Up sprang the dog, growling and snapping angrily. Once more up flew the bee; and once more I jumped.

'Back again, as quick as thought, came the bee, hovering directly over the dog's head. He knew that the next second she would blunder right into his very

eyes or nose or ears—couldn't see her yet—but started up again in a regular fury.

'Away wafted the bee, meandering carelessly here and there. After her went the dog, grumbling and snapping. And jump, jump, jump went I. Oh! if the bee would only keep drawing his attention away from me in that manner, I might yet be saved.

'The bee now kept on philandering about in the grass, just a little beyond the dog's reach,—he never taking his eyes off her for a single instant. Each time she swooped suddenly down on to a tall red poppy, or a spray of fresh wild celery, he made a spring at her; each time he sprang, I jumped; and each time I jumped, I lessened the distance between me and the river.

'Presently, when the bee had led the dog so far away that I couldn't see him at all as I lay,—when I was near enough to the edge of the river to see my beautiful sparkling water as it ran by me,—I gathered together my wits and my strength, and jump, jump, jump over the bank; and plump—I fell into the soft mud in about an inch or so of water only!

'Down came the horrible monster who had first caught me, after me. Bounding at his heels came the terrible dog. But I wasn't going to be caught then! Two or three desperate struggles, and I was off—off into deep

water, covered with mud and fainting with fatigue, but happily just in time to warn my family and my friends, and to save them from such a fearful fate as that which had so nearly overtaken me!'

There was a great deal of flapping and slapping of tails and fins after this; in the midst of which several voices were heard to say that there was a certain bright-eyed little roach who had, it was well known, a very agreeable collection of stories at command, and who would no doubt kindly favour the company with one on this present most auspicious occasion.

'It can't be me,' said a little roach, towards whom all eyes were now directed. 'I have certainly no hair-breadth escape to relate; but I can tell you about the poor young fellow that fell into a deep stream, because he would lean too far over the bank, to gather a wild flower for a young girl with whom he was walking. She had noticed the pretty little blossom the first, for, from where I was, I saw her stop and point; and he had smiled and nodded his head, and gone back to get it for her.

'Ah me! I don't know why he didn't move or struggle; but there was a great stone close against his forehead as he lay, and I suppose that had something to do with it!

'I can tell you, too, of the two shrill screams of agony that I heard; and of the second sudden splash, and the something white that came through the water like a flash between me and the sunlight; and of the pretty creature, with long fair hair and clenched white hands, that whirled past me down the rapids as far as the waterfall,—poor, maddened thing!—and over it.

'And I can tell you, too, of the lovely smile that there was on his mouth; and how the water rippled across his handsome young face, and gently lifted the rings of dark hair from his white forehead; and of the long hours that he lay there before they found him; and of my grief when they *did* find him, and took him away from me for ever. For I had loved to look at him. He seemed so peaceful and happy as he lay there, with the little blue flowers still crushed in his hand. And I saw her too. I swam round by the back water; for I knew where I should find her,—at the bottom of the pool, just below all that leaping white foam; and there, sure enough, she was!

'Oh, how full my heart was! How I wished that they could have said only one little good-bye to each other. It was hard, very hard to lie there, with but a few yards only of careless, tearing, green water between them. It was very hard for her to die with that sudden load of regret and remorse at her heart, and not to see

that lovely smile on his face, that said so plainly, "Don't be sorry, dear; I'll give you the little blue flowers when we meet by and by." And it was very hard that he could never know how recklessly she had thrown away her life for him, in her brave, mad, struggling effort to save him.'

'For how much longer are you going to favour us with your cheerful reminiscences?' said the pike, yawning. 'If it had been me, I should have tried to have nibbled the leather off his boots. Leather-boot isn't at all a bad thing. But perhaps it may interest you to hear of the fish, an ancestor of mine, who swallowed a red and yellow cow, a maroon-coloured horse with only one ear, and a domestic cat as big as a large sow, all at one mouthful!'

'Oh, oh! come!' cried everybody simultaneously.

'Do you doubt my word?' cried the pike, dashing angrily into the very midst of them all.

'Oh! no, no!' cried everybody simultaneously.

'He did more,' continued the pike; 'he ate fowls that were as big as donkeys, and whole rows of trees with red trunks and pea-green foliage; and a man and a woman that were as tall as the house they lived in; and the house itself, that had a door too small to admit the goose through it,—only the goose was the size of a

year-old calf; and wooden palings that reached as far as the chimneys. And all these wonderful things came tumbling about his head one day, as he lay resting at the bottom of the stream.'

'Why, why! that's my little brother's box of farm-yard things that you're talking of. I dropt them over the side of a punt two days ago, 'cause the swans frightened me,' cried Jack. 'Oh, you wicked, story-telling old pike! you ate them up yourself!'

The pike made a rush at him. Away scampered the rest of the fish. Jack would perhaps have shared the fate of the red and yellow cow, etc. etc., had not the barbel behaved with great presence of mind. He caught firm hold of him, and dragged him swiftly up the river.

'I'll save you, I'll save you,' whispered he; 'only you must faithfully promise you will never fish again.'

'No, no; indeed I won't,' stammered Jack.

'You promise?'

'I promise.'

'Then you are saved,' said the barbel solemnly.

And so he was; for though the pike seemed to be rapidly gaining on them,—although Jack could see out at the tip of his boots the wide-open jaws of the pursuing monster, and hear him mutter between his teeth, 'I'll have you, I'll bite you,'—still, somehow or

other he wasn't frightened; and the longer he struggled forward, the warmer the water became. It was, in fact, getting quite snug and pleasant, and was beginning to make Jack feel quite drowsy. There was a faint, delicious smell of tea and toast, too; and straight ahead there was the cheerful, encouraging flicker of a bright wood fire.

Jack opened his eyes. He was in his own comfortable little bed, and his mother was bending over him with a cup of tea in her hand.

'Mother,' said he, 'I've been with the fishes, and I've left them everything out of my jacket-pockets.'

'That you certainly have, you little torment!' said she. 'Drink this, and try to keep warm and quiet.'

'And I've promised faithfully I'll never go fishing again, mother.'

'I'll take very good care you shall not,' cried his mother.

But she smiled and kissed him, nevertheless, as she tucked him up warmly.

VI.

WHY THE ICEBERGS COME SO FAR SOUTH.

WHY THE ICEBERGS COME SO FAR SOUTH.

ONCE upon a time, so many, many years ago that we must not stop to count them, a little lad lay dying on the ice. Nothing earthly could save him; not all the little long-eared fur caps, not all the thickly fur-lined coats and leggings, not all the warm seal-skin waistcoats and gloves and stout boots in the world would have been

enough to keep out the intense cold that was around him. For the ice on which the little lad was lying was the ice of the wide, wide Arctic Ocean.

Not that he suffered in any way. The drowsiness that had so suddenly overcome him, as he ran wildly, deliriously to and fro, on the boundless dreary expanse of frozen sea, had given way to profound sleep; and as he lay there quietly sleeping his life away, he dreamt, yet without pain or distress, of the brave little vessel, where, though the work was so much harder than he had thought it would be, yet the men were after all so much kinder to him than from their rough manners he had at first thought they might be, seeing that he was but a naughty little fellow who had run away from home to go to sea, and, being rather confused about things, was apt to be getting continually in somebody's way. Of the long, dreary voyage he dreamt, and of his own quick repentance, and of the good resolutions he formed. And of the storm that had come upon them so suddenly, and of the wrong course that the captain had taken. Of the first view of the glittering white and blue wall of ice, and of the gradual surrounding of their disabled, struggling little vessel by that same ice. Of the long, dreary months of anxiety and dire forebodings, and of the 'ble few days of lingering starvation from the cruel

cold and gnawing hunger. Of the gradual dying away of the little crew; and of the final crash, when the courageous little vessel cracked together in every part of her like a mere empty walnut-shell, and the few survivors, roused from their apathy, rushed out madly on to the ice away from her, foodless and hopeless, to meet a certain death farther on. Of the great white shroud that awaited them all!

And after these, came the sweet recollections of the happy hut-like home, in the fir forests of dear Norway, that he had been so eager to leave! Once again he felt the tender kisses of his mammy warm on his cheek, and heard the pleasant, grave words of his father. Once again he saw the dimpled rosy face of his little sister Frölich, and the mischievous smile and eyes of his little brother Christian. Once again he fell into their arms one by one, and sobbed out his promise—never, never to leave them again.

Yes; God was being very good to the white-faced little human being that lay there alone and dying, with not one fellow-creature within countless hundreds of miles of him. His last thoughts were sweet ones!

'Good night, foolish little boy—good night!' said the blue water, slap-slapping against the knife-like edges of the cold, cruel bed on which he lay.

'Good night!' shrilly cried the wild white snow-bird,

as she swooped down to look at the curious sight, and, making nothing of it, rose into the air again, skurling and whirling.

'Good night, little forlorn boy!' sighed the wind as it swept, sadly whistling and moaning, over the jagged surface of ice and water; for the wind visits the whole of the globe, and knows everything. 'I shall tell the fir-trees in Norway that I saw you, and they will whisper-whisper it to each other, until it reaches your mother's ears. She will think it sounds sad, and will think of you directly. But she won't quite understand them. That's all I can do for you, little Erik!'

And Erik was silent. So the wind went on its lonely way.

'Hallo!' said a pert young seal, popping its head out of the water, and resting its two flippers on the edge of the ice. 'What's this?'

The mamma seal popped her head out of the water too.

'Gracious, child! come away!' cried she. 'It's a man!'

It was only a boy, but the old seal knew no better.

'I don't think it looks dangerous,' said the young seal kindly.

But all that could be seen of the old seal now was the tip of her nose.

'Will you come away, or not?' cried she anxiously. 'Presently, before you know where you are, it will poke at you with its sting;* and that's no joke, I can tell you. I had one in me once, and lots of seals get killed by it.'

'But this thing looks quite dead. I'll go and feel it,' persisted the wayward young seal; and then, with all the foolhardiness and rashness of its age, it actually scrambled on to the ice, and went calmly flop-flopping towards its enemy.

This was too much for the mother seal.

That child would certainly be the death of her one of these days; yet how could she abandon the tiresome young scatterbrain to his fate? So she too scrambled on to the ice, and flop-flopped after her disobedient son.

But she need not have feared. The human being never moved. His eyes were shut. He let them push him, and smell him, and even suffered the young seal to pass a wet flipper once or twice over his face, without so much as winking an eyelid.

As a last experiment, the old seal herself ventured to bite one of his fur-covered hands. The bite went right through the glove. The seal was obliged to

* The old seal must have been thinking of a harpoon.

swallow a mouthful of loose fur; but little Erik never stirred.

'What shall we do with him?' whispered the young seal.

'Leave him here, of course!'

'Oh, but he is so pretty! I wish the old ice-king and the little princess could see him. She says she once saw some human beings,' sighed the young seal.

'Child,' said the old seal suddenly, 'that's a capital idea of yours. Now I will forgive you for all your various little naughtinesses of to-day—only you are never to do it again, mind! Come at once, and help me to push this piece of ice as far as the palace; and let us make haste, for it's getting late.'

And so little Erik was taken to the ice-king's palace—a good many miles farther north than man had ever been before, or is ever likely to go again, seeing, to be precise, that it stood within an easy afternoon's walk of the North Pole.

Had Erik been conscious, he must have been profoundly impressed with the splendour of this northern monarch's dwelling-place. So vast, indeed, it was, that its huge walls and turrets, columns, towers, archways, and courts seemed to extend for miles and miles before one. And what would surely strike the most careless observer with aston-

ishment was, that all styles of architecture were to be found there side by side; from the most severe of severely beautiful Doric columns to the most fantastical of Moorish towers—all were there, yet all were harmonious.

The old king and the princess were delighted with the curious present brought to them by the seals. They thanked them warmly,—as warmly, that is, as their temperaments would admit,—and dismissed them a few miles farther south, where there were narrow streaks of water here and there for them to swim about in, and great air-holes in the ice, through which they could dive down and come up again as often as they pleased. For where the ice-king lived there was no water at all. Everything save the sky above them, even the splendid palace itself, was one vast unequal mass of glittering, many-coloured ice.

How glad they were of this little change in the doings and amusements of the day, any one who has ever tried to sit patiently on an enormous iceberg for month after month and year after year, during a long and uneventful life, will readily understand. And yet, monotonous as must have been the royal existence, neither the ice-king or his daughter wished it otherwise. For when the sun shone, oh, what a glorious

sight it was! How little likely was it that they could ever tire of looking at such a brilliant scene!

And though they had no subjects, friends, or favourites fashioned like their own selves, as other monarchs had, nevertheless what a huge devoted army of faithful servants had they, in the large white polar bears, that shuffled incessantly to and fro before them; and the great fierce-tusked walruses, that came to lay themselves so humbly down at their very feet; and the sad-eyed seals, that laid their smooth heads so tenderly in the young princess' lap.

Oh, it was all very pleasant indeed, if it did lack variety. But, now that this strange young being had been given to them, their cup of happiness was full.

The first thing to be done was, of course, to put a little life into him—to rouse him and to warm him. And to do this it was only necessary to hold him tightly to their pitying hearts, for nothing is warmer than that.

It is true, too, that the princess was somewhat of a fairy, having had a fairy for her godmother; and that, with the aid of a few magic words, which she traced on the ice with part of a whale's tooth, and then rubbed quickly out again before she could count three times three backwards, she managed to restore consciousness to the half-frozen Erik.

And he opened his eyes.

What he saw before him were two filmy creatures, both wonderfully alike; only, one was old and had a white beard, not of hair but of icicles, and the other was young and had no beard at all. But both had strangely white, glittering faces, and shadowy limbs, and long floating hair, which did not look like hair, but like a little cloud of grey mist frozen into whiteness and solidity.

But Erik, because of the spell that had been wrought upon him, saw nothing strange in all this, and knew no misgiving. He smiled at them, well pleased to be awake again; and when the ice-princess held out her white arms to him, saying,—

'Will you stay with us always, little human being? Will you stay with us always?'—

He ran straight into them, and kissed her as gladly and fearlessly as though she had been little Frölich at home in her fir forest, and cried out,—

'Yes, indeed I will! I will stay with you always if you will let me.'

Ten long years soon passed away. How long they had been for Erik's weeping mother, she herself, and Heaven, that knows all things, knew well. But for Erik they had been as mere dreams in the night.

Meanwhile he had grown to manhood, the ice-princess to womanhood; and the old king, after joining their hands together and giving them his blessing, had been well content to melt gradually away to nothing, and to be known in his beloved ice-kingdom no more.

The ice-princess and the Norwegian Erik grieved bitterly indeed for their father; and it was some time before the thought of marriage—even while according, as it did, with his last wishes—was suffered to dwell in their hearts and minds.

Time, however, stopped at last the rapid flow of tiny ice-drops that rolled from their young eyes; and the date of the marriage festivities being agreed on, preparations for the event were at once begun, and rapidly carried forward.

No less than eight hundred bears, twelve hundred walruses, and an innumerable number of seals came northwards to offer their services, and to assist at the wedding.

A committee of bears was formed, and the youngest and nimblest among them was deputed to run up the North Pole and fetch down the Polar Star, in order that the walruses might give it a good rubbing and burnishing with their ivory tusks.

This being done, and the Polar Star carefully put back again, then came the turns of all the other stars,

such as were within easy reach,—that is, twenty-three others, belonging to the group called the 'Little Bear;' no less than eighty-seven belonging to the 'Great Bear;' besides the lovely set of twenty-one gems that form the 'Northern Crown.'

Oh, there was plenty to do. And the young bear was kept scrambling up and down the North Pole—taking out the stars, numbering the holes, and putting back the cleaned ones in their proper places—until his four stumpy legs positively ached with fatigue.

The Aurora Borealis, too, was given due notice; and as she immediately began to practise, flashing in and out all over the sky at the rate of at least thirty or forty times in the hour, it seemed likely that on the score of illuminations nothing would be wanting.

To the seals was given the task of rubbing down and cleaning the whole palace. And the way in which they did it was to flop, and dab, and drag themselves along on their chests continuously, over the surface they wished to polish, till it shone and glittered like new diamonds. A less fatiguing mode of polishing than this might perhaps be discovered, but not a more effectual one; and that, after all, was the principal thing.

Erik was in high spirits. He ran from walrus to bear, and from bear to seal, and back again from seal

to walrus, directing and encouraging the workers with ever-increasing interest and energy. Everybody was so busy, in fact, that they had not noticed that the young princess had crept away from the noise and bustle, and sat silent and sad, apart from them all. Not even Erik himself noticed her absence, until she called to him in the sweet voice that was so dear to him, and said,—

'Erik, if you are not too busy, I should be glad of a few minutes' serious conversation with you.'

Erik only smiled without answering, and seated himself by her side.

'You have perhaps thought me odd, and changed in my manner towards you of late, Erik. That could never be. Nothing will ever change me. The cause of my depression, and I have suffered from that more than I have let you know, Erik, is this. Two paths lie before me. The one I might tread hand in hand with yourself; the other bids fair to be but a lonely one. And yet the lonely is the one I ought to take. You are not unaware that I am the last solitary descendant of a long and numerous race of ice-kings. I feel that the struggle which is going on in my breast is unworthy the daughter of such illustrious ancestors, and I will hesitate no longer. I have resolved, therefore, to sacrifice my affection for you, my earliest and only

companion, strong and unwavering as it is, to your own welfare, and to my own unswerving sense of justice. You shall know what I know. I have resolved to break the spell that has already too long, alas! bound your mind and heart to me. I am resolved to tell you who you really are, and to leave you then to decide for yourself upon your future life. Your first word of regret will be my doom. Recollect that. It is for me to be just towards you, and for you to be pitiful towards me.'

'Dear princess,' said Erik affectionately, as he bent the knee, and kissed her cold white hand, 'I have already some hazy notions as to what my nationality may be. The venerable seal, who says she found me lying on the ice, opines from the cut of my boots and leggings that I may possibly be a child of the far south, where there is only ice for about six months in the year, and where there are actually no seals or white bears of any kind. That such a spot exists in this world seems hard to believe'—

'Erik,' interrupted the princess, 'the old seal is doubtless of noble family. Part of her great-grandmother became part of a royal princess' muff, and in consequence, her family are entitled to wear a fish-bone through their nose. She has most likely seen a great many vessels of different nations, and the sailors belong-

ing to them, during her lifetime, and may be wise concerning their usual way of apparelling themselves. But she will do but little for you, with her suppositions, beyond mentioning the mere name of a place, which has at present no signification in your ears. Before your arrival, when I was very young indeed, I travelled all over the world with my fairy godmother in the shape of a bird, and I have seen most places and know most things. She lives no longer, and the penalty of my return to earth and water now would be death. Still, I can recall to you scenes which you might like to remember, if only you'—

'Dearest princess,' said Erik, venturing himself to interrupt her; 'dearest princess, beyond the mere supposition, as you say, that I am not ice-born, as yourself, I know and care nothing. I have the assurance of your fond and faithful affection, and in that knowledge I am happy. Why should you seek to awaken memories so evidently distressing to yourself, and that are so completely indifferent to me?'

'Then,' said the princess firmly, 'you do not care to go back to your green fields, and your budding flowers, and your summer acres of waving yellow corn? You do not yearn to see your own fir forests again, and the little brother and sister, perhaps, sitting threading the green cones together beneath them? Your eyes

don't weary, then, for the sight of the great free fjörds, or for the deep, green, silent pools inland? Your ears do not yearn for the sound of the rushing rivers, or the tumbling white waterfalls dashing from rock to rock? You don't long to see the silver salmon again, leaping in the bright blue moonlight? or the soft ptarmigan flitting homewards in the long twilight? You don't care for the bright red light, then, in the windows? for the dear old mother's smiling face in the doorway? or for the old father's hearty words of welcome, "Come in, lads; come in out of the cold"? Tell me, Erik, do you not care for all these things?'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Erik, looking full at her with wide-open, astonished eyes. Then after a few moments' silence,—'And yet,' continued he wonderingly, 'it seems as if I had heard all that before.'

'Nay,' said the princess very sadly, 'you have known it all. It lies frozen into your brain, Erik, and I am now about to make it spring fresh and green to life again.'

So saying, she raised one white arm.

'Stop!' cried Erik; 'stop, dear princess! I know enough; I wish to hear nothing further. I don't remember the things you speak of, nor do I wish to do so. Let us forget this conversation for ever.'

'No, no!' cried the princess; 'I love you too well to deceive you. It is you who shall decide.'

Silent and awestruck Erik stood before her, while she, raising her arm, made a few rapid movements over his head, uttering the while in clear, loud tones the name of the star above them.

'Ras Alhagus! Ras Alhagus! Ras Alhagus!'

There was a deep silence, broken only by Erik's uncontrollable sobs, and the distant sound of the busy, moving animals.

'What do you remember now, Erik?' asked the princess presently.

But Erik fell on his knees, and bowed his head in his hands, still sobbing. The rush of memory so long held in check was too sudden, too violent for words. He could only think, and regret, and weep. He laid his head prostrate on the hard ice, and a terrible agony of yearning took strong hold of him. And his love for the ice-princess waxed less and less, as the thoughts of all the dear ones he had left for so long grew stronger and stronger.

Everything came back to him as though he were a little lad of ten years old again, in that one brief, bitter moment. The hut-like home; the fir-trees; the old mother milking the goats at eventide; Frölich dipping her fat forefinger into the seething pailful; the old father

smoking his great black pipe in the doorway; little chubby Christian's shout of delight, 'Here's Erik! here's Erik at last!' And with that thought Erik found breath at length, and words, and started to his feet, crying bitterly,—

'Oh, what am I doing here? what am I doing here?'

Scarcely, however, had the words passed his lips, when he pressed his hands to his eyes as if to assure himself that he yet *had* eyes to see with, and looked around him in sudden horror and dismay.

The ice-princess was gone!

The sound of the busy moving animals shuffling to and fro on the ice had ceased. They were no longer there. The Aurora Borealis no longer illumined the sky. The splendid palace with its marvellous towers and columns and gateways had melted away, and for miles and miles around him the ice lay silent, white, and desolate.

Once more Erik felt that terrible cold that paralyzes limb and will together. Once more the horrible dread of dying alone, forgotten and unsearched for, in that awful man-deserted waste, laid strong hold of his heart. Once more, trembling and despairing, he fell on his knees with an agonized cry to Heaven for help and comfort. Once more, the words half said, he fell back overpowered and senseless.

The affection of the generous ice-princess, however, survived even the bitter and outspoken regrets that Erik had not been able to keep back. He was not left to die where he fell. He was by her orders conveyed with marvellous rapidity by an innumerable number of seals as far south as was necessary, in order that he might be seen by one of the whaling boats which were known to be in those seas at that time.

And in fact so it happened. Erik's recumbent form was soon discerned from the top of a whaling boat mast, and a little boat was sent to pick up what might after all only prove to be a frozen man. The captain of the whaler was, however, repaid for his humanity; for to the satisfaction of saving a human life was added the satisfaction of securing a large number of the finest seals he had ever remembered meeting with, a great many of the devoted creatures preferring to die rather than to abandon the unconscious form of their sometime well-loved master.

In consideration of the luck he had brought them, Erik was very well received on board, and carefully nursed by some rather rough hands during a long and terrible illness, which lasted during the whole voyage home, and during which he certainly talked enough delirious nonsense about ice kings and queens, and

North Poles, to frighten the most sceptical mariner out of his seven senses.

He reached home, however, at last, a weary shadow of his former self. And he saw his mother and his father twelve years older in years, and twenty-four years older in sorrow and suffering; and he knew that it was the burning tears they had shed for his desertion of them, and his misconduct, that had furrowed the deep wrinkles on their cheeks.

He saw Frölich,—not fat, rosy Frölich, that threw herself so gladly always into his arms, and held her chubby face up to his to be kissed; but a tall, slender, graceful Frölich, with demure ways, and already betrothed to a neighbour's son, and much wrapped up in her new family,—a Frölich that felt and looked a little strange with the long-lost brother she knew so little of.

And Christian, too. Ah! Christian, thank God,—though he was tall and broad, and boastful concerning his prowess with gun and fishing-rod,—had little Christian's mischievous, merry face still, and his heart! The bare name of 'brother' was a charm to both, and they hugged each other with a will. With both boys it was a life to begin afresh. With Frölich it was a different life, away from both. With the mother and father it was a sorrow to look back to, and disappointment, as well as an exceeding thankfulness.

And when they were all seated round the fire at night, and the cuckoo-clock struck seven, how they all laughed when Erik turned to Christian,—'Come, little brother,' said he, smiling; 'shall Erik carry you up to bed?'

Yes, there were many joys. But there were abiding sorrows also.

When they had all told him the stories of those ten or twelve years over and over again,—for he was never tired of hearing of the things they had done during his absence, year by year, month by month, ah! and if that *could* be, day by day,—when for the hundredth time he would begin to tell them his own strange story about the ice-princess, and all the marvels of the North Pole, and would presently see his mother bow her head to hide the sudden rush of tears, and Frölich's half-startled, half-puzzled face, and the quick-exchanged look of pain between Christian and his father,—oh, believe me, it was agony to him to know that either they did not believe him, or that they thought that his long illness had injured his brain, and that his story was the story of a madman!

True, the captain of the whaler had told them where he found him—in the North Seas, sure enough! But how did that argue that he went there ten years ago or more in the ill-fated *Pride of Stockholm?* How could

they believe that? So between Erik and his dearest ones there lay for ever afterwards the shadow that hung over those unaccounted-for years of his life. Well might he at times doubt his own reason; well might he cry out bitterly and remorsefully,—

'Would that I had never left you all!'

One word about the ice-princess.

She could no longer stay at the North Pole, where every little drooping icicle, every little twinkling star, reminded her of Erik. Heartbroken and despairing, she took the form of an iceberg, and floated away from her kingdom recklessly southwards, entirely careless of the fate that might await her.

She wandered farther, much farther, than Erik's northern home lay. Had his eyes been turned seawards, they might unconsciously have rested on her, as she floated, many, many miles from the shore, past the white sea-coast line, and the tall green pines of his own country home, silent and glittering. She scarcely knew where she was, or where she was going.

Erik seemed gone away from her, so far, so far, that she herself could not go far enough to find him, and to murmur one last 'good-bye' to him. Farther south still, into the broad, warm waters of the Atlantic Ocean,—farther than iceberg had ever been seen before,—with-

out so much as one murmured regret for her own ice-kingdom.

And the ice-kingdom waited in vain for its princess.

Year after year, at the same time, the faithful icebergs come down southwards in shoals to find her, and to bring her back to her glorious free home again. Like her, they make their way farther and farther southwards, undaunted and still hopeful, until, like her, hope and themselves grow less and less together. And none of them have ever found their princess, though it is so many countless years since they first began to search for her. And none of them ever go back to their northern home again.

That is why one sees so many icebergs so far south.

VII.

RULI'S SACRIFICE.

RULI'S SACRIFICE.

THE general opinion was, that the old countess was nothing more or less than a wicked old fairy. And indeed it must be confessed that there were some grounds for the supposition. She lived on the top of a high hill, in an old grey stone castle that had a window for every day of the year in it, which windows looked down like so many watch-

ful eyes on the straggling little village that cowered down in the valley beneath them. She had absolute authority over the poor creatures who lived there, and certainly, as far as the things of this world could go, her power for good or for evil among them was no less than a fairy's might have been. For they were simple, easily-contented souls enough, and the only things they might have asked of a good fairy were simple too; perhaps a little seed for sowing, a young goat to replace the old one that was just dead, a few extra loaves of bread and a little good wine in times of sickness, or a little help with their farms and their roads and their children's education, and a little protection from the constant floods in winter and droughts in summer. Such things as these the old countess could have bestowed on them as easily, and at as little cost to herself, as any good fairy could have done. For there was not a house, or a rood of land, or a bird, or a beast,—no, there was not even a single tree for miles and miles around her castle, that did not belong to her, and her alone.

What wonder, then, when she withheld from the poor and the afflicted the mite they asked her for from out of her vast store of wealth, that they refused to believe that a heart so uncharitable as hers could possibly dwell in a human breast, and

thought her what they called her,—Maligna, the malicious one!

There were other lesser things, too, in which she resembled the wicked fairies. She was hideously ugly. She wore a high-peaked hat, and she carried a crooked stick in her hand. When she rode through the village she sat sideways on a coal-black horse, with a flaunting tail, snorting nostrils, and fiery red eyes.

It was her custom to stop at each little dwelling and call out the people of the house, who would come out trembling and frightened to learn her pleasure; and sometimes her pleasure would consist in ordering them not to pick up for the future the loose bits of brushwood that might be lying about the roads and by the hedges, but to come to the castle gate and honestly buy of her steward what they required for firewood; or she might go the round of the small farms, levying contributions of eggs and poultry from the farmers' wives, lopping off a corner of land here, and adding a little rent on there. No one had anything to say against anything she did, for if they did not like it they were welcome to go. Only where were they to go to? And after these visits she would give her coal-black horse a thwack with her crooked stick, and off she would go, chuckling to herself at the terror of the little children, and the anxious faces of the elders.

More than that—no one had ever been allowed to see the inside of the castle. More than that still—no one wanted to see it!

Each one was quite content to believe all the evil that was said about the old countess and her home, and perhaps he might even add a little of his own imaginings to swell the account; and certainly, though there may have been somewhat of natural curiosity here and there as to what mysteries and horrors the grim old castle really did conceal within its moss-grown walls, there was undoubtedly far more of wholesome dread as to what its possible dangers might be; and the great iron gateway at the brow of the hill, which was as far as the village people were allowed to go, was every bit as far as they cared to go.

Towards the close of one long winter, things were in as gloomy a state as they could well be. Every year the half or more of the little valley was under water for some weeks. But this year the floods had been more extended, had lasted longer, and had been far more destructive than ever.

The old countess might easily have prevented this. For a certain sum of money, the absence of which would never have been perceived in her great canvas bags full of shining golden pieces, she might have kept

all that scattered water in proper bounds. Reservoirs, canals, and locks might have been constructed, which would not only have prevented the poor people from having too much water in the winter, but would have prevented also the possibility of their having too little water in the summer. But when this fact was represented to her, she would simply shrug her shoulders, and ask, 'Is it my fault that all the water comes at once?'

Spring was at hand, but there was no spring in their hearts. The waters had gone at last, but, alas! they had taken with them their stores of seed and wheat, and most of their cattle, little as the number was. Their houses were ruined. Their gardens, their fields, and their orchards were all beaten down and destroyed. Their cupboards were empty. Their cellars were drenched. Their little savings were going fast; and Maligna still galloped round on her coal-black horse, collecting rents when she could get them, levying contributions, scolding, grumbling, and threatening all in a breath. In this great strait, as they could get no help from those who were so well able to help them, they were obliged to seek it at the hands of those who were but little able to help them. But these last were so willing, that their good-will doubled and trebled the value of what they gave.

It is quite time to speak of little Ruli and her mother. They had not suffered quite so much as the rest—perhaps because they had so very little to lose. However, their one little field lay higher than those of their neighbours, and though the waters had taken their goat, they had spared the kid, and their few fowls were safe too. So that, little as they had, it was still more than they had expected to keep, and their hearts were very grateful. Of what was left them, then, with open heart and hand, with one or two kindly words of comfort and encouragement, so sorely needed, they gave, cheerfully and willingly, although they were forced to stint themselves of much in order to do it. That is to say, Ruli's mother was. For the child herself knew no diminution in her daily bowls of goat's milk, and her thick slices of rough black bread. But Ruli, though such a little creature, had a thinking mind beyond her years, and a very loving heart; and as often as not, her little breakfast would be shared with the desolate little dogs, cats, and birds that could find but little food for their gaping, hungry mouths, seeing that the masters who had fed them in better days had now but very little food to put into their own gaping, hungry mouths. Ruli, however, made but very little difference in her tender little heart between human beings and mere animals. Their unspoken wants were precious to her as her own.

And in this Ruli was but Heaven's humble little instrument.

Besides the help which each one gave to the other in food and clothes, there was the little money-box at church, in which the better-off—those who had had dinner that day, and were sure of it for at least the morrow—dropped their copper coins for the general benefit of the starving homeless ones. Every one who could spare something gave it, and many gave it who could but very ill spare it. The men gave their tobacco and their drink-money, and the women their long-hoarded savings that had been destined to buy a new gown or shawl. Ruli's mother had given her silver earrings, that her dead husband had given her on their wedding-day. But Ruli herself had nothing to give. This grieved her sorely. And she had begged hard to be allowed to stuff her little red woollen comforter into the money-box. She would gladly have taken off her feet her only pair of well-patched leather shoes, and her only worsted hood, to give away to those who had nothing half so comfortable. But her mother had said,—

'No, Ruli! that would not be your gift, but mine. For I could not let my little one suffer the cold while I was warm myself, and I should have to part with my warm things to get you new smaller ones. A true

sacrifice, Ruli, means something of which we deprive ourselves, and our own selves only, for the good of others. You have nothing of your very own yet. Wait till you are a little older! Meanwhile my Ruli feeds the hungry robins. Be content with that. As are our means, so Heaven sees our gifts.'

But Ruli's heart was much larger than her means, and she could not be content. So, though she gave up all thoughts of stripping her little body for the sake of the poor clotheless children, still she pondered with solemn, wide-open eyes as to what she could really deprive herself of, so that her gift might be a real sacrifice and not a pretence. For her mother's words had sunk deeply into her heart.

One day Ruli, clad like a second Little Red Riding-hood in her red cloak, had been sent by her mother to a cottage a little way up on the hills, and about half-way to where the little church stood, with a loaf of bread and a bowl of good soup for a sick neighbour; and, like Little Red Riding Hood, she met a wolf! Only the wolf had only two high-heeled legs, and a tall hat, and a crooked stick in her hand, and was mounted on a coal-black horse, which she reined in when she met Ruli.

'Whither away, little girl?' said Maligna, showing all her irregular teeth in a frightful smile, fully expecting

that the little girl would drop her basket and take to her two fat little legs in abject terror, as all the other children did.

But Ruli's mother had suffered but very little idle gossipping to reach her child's tender ears. Ruli knew nothing more of Maligna than that she was their lady, and she was not afraid, as were the other children. She dropped a little unsteady curtsey, and told Maligna where she was going.

'And what is your name?'

'I'm Ruli.'

'And where do you live?'

'There,' said Ruli, extending one fat arm, and pointing vaguely to the whole village.

'Ah! Is it a nice place?'

'Oh, it's a very nice place,' said well-satisfied Ruli earnestly.

'You're wrong. It's a hole! And tell me, to whom do you belong?'

'To mother.'

'What's her name?'

'Ruli too—old Ruli!'

'Very well. I've no objection for the present. And now, you fat little frump, you are coming for a ride with me on my nice black horse. Jump up!'

'No, thank you,' said Ruli; 'I haven't the time.'

'Hoity-toity! But I say you shall! And if you don't come and jump up behind me this very minute, I shall jump down and pop you into my pocket, and have you stewed, when I get home, with tenpenny nails and oyster shells, and eat you up for my supper.'

'Ha, ha, ha!' laughed Ruli frankly and loudly.

Maligna stared at her twinkling face full of fun.

'But I mean it!' said Maligna, gnashing her teeth together. 'Don't you know me? I live in the grey castle up yonder, and they call me the wicked old fairy! I'll wicked-fairy them! Now come, jump up, and I'll take you to see the saucepan I mean to have you stewed in.'

Ruli's dimpled face grew serious at this continued pleasantry, and she shrank back a little.

'I must go first where I was told,' said she, shaking her head.

'No, no!' cried Maligna. 'I'm quite longing for nice, hot, stewed little girl. You must come with me at once.'

'No, no!' cried Ruli.

'You won't, you obstinate fat lump?' cried Maligna. 'Then I must make you!' And with that she scrambled off her horse, and came hobbling after half-alarmed, half-amused Ruli—only her hobbling was as rapid as any one else's running.

Ruli had no time for flight. Maligna had just stretched out her strong bony hand to grasp the tender little arm, when she caught her foot in a stone, and down she came with a crash, striking her head violently against a stone, and lay unconscious at Ruli's feet.

Ruli might easily have run away then, and indeed that was her first thought; but her second, and best, was to stay and see if she could be of any use to the stricken old lady, who had such disagreeable notions of fun.

The children of very poor people learn early the meaning of 'having one's wits about one;' and Ruli knelt down beside Maligna and tried her best, though her experience was but slight, and her little attentions more kindly meant than efficacious. It was, however, such a very extraordinary circumstance in Maligna's life to see, when she opened her eyes with a groan, a little child's fearless blue eyes looking fixedly at her, and to feel two soft, fat hands smoothing back the hair from her bruised temples, and to hear a kind little voice saying, 'Get up now, get up now—be better in another minute!' that it had just the same rousing effect on her that salts, or burnt feathers, or cold water might have had.

'Well, you are an extraordinary baby!' said she,

sitting up. 'I've a good mind not to worry you any more.'

But Ruli continued her kindly offices until Maligna gave her a little sudden push. 'Come, off you go! Take up your basket and vanish, or perhaps I shall change my mind and begin to feel hungry again.'

Ruli did not wait to be told three times. The sacred rites of charity being accomplished, she took to her little heels and was out of sight in a moment.

Maligna, however, when she had risen from the ground and had called her coal-black horse to her (which, by the bye, was, for a wicked fairy's horse, nibbling full peacefully at the short sweet grass that grew by the roadside), found that her old back ached, and her head swam, and her temples throbbed, and in fact her whole body trembled, far more than was agreeable. It was impossible for her to put her foot into the long loop of strong leather that hung down by the side of the horse, and give that one vigorous sudden spring into the saddle that so much amazed the country-folk. All she could do at first was to sit and rest herself until she felt strong enough to lead her horse up the hill towards the church and the castle, in the hope of meeting some passers-by, and obtaining assistance from them. The thought was intolerable. To ask assistance of any

one, to be forced to confess to the slightest weakness of mind or body, was as sharply painful to her as running a needle down one's finger-nail is to any one else! And perhaps, for all that she suffered such intense pain in her bruised head and limbs, she was glad to find that she did not chance to meet one single person between the place where she had fallen and the first place of shelter she came to. And that was the little hillside church.

It was getting very late, but the church door was still open. It was not indeed a time, when so many hearts were laden with sorrow, to keep it shut.

Maligna, alas! scarcely knew what the inside of the church was like. Nor was it even now with any thought of devotion in her rugged heart that she fastened her horse's bridle to the low-hanging branch of a tree, and stepped wearily and groaning across the holy threshold.

There was nobody there. A dimly-burning light or two here and there scarcely lighted up the building, small as it was, enough to see into the farthermost corner of it. And the silence was absolute.

Maligna, however, sat her down. Somebody would come presently. Indeed, if she had to wait till the even, somebody *must* come by and by, to put out the lights before they shut the doors. And that some

body, she said to herself, if she were not able to sit upon her horse, should go and fetch her a conveyance of some sort, and should accompany her as far as the castle gates.

Maligna sat very quiet, her feet on a second chair, her elbows on her knees, and her chin in her hands—the very picture indeed of a wicked old fairy, only wicked fairies are not to be found in churches. It isn't likely, even if her sharp, bead-like eyes rested on any one single spot long enough to see it, that they noticed how tumble-down the walls were, and how discoloured with dirt and age; how uneven the flag-stones were, cracked and chipped in every direction; or how moth and worm eaten were the woodwork and the altar-cloth. It was all very, very miserable; but Maligna troubled herself nothing about it. One can *look* at things with the eyes, but one must *see* them with the heart. She was most likely thinking about her own rather dilapidated condition, and a great deal about Ruli, strange to say. For Ruli's baby confidence had wondrously moved her wayward old heart.

'Pish!' said she irritably to herself, 'how that silly little brat's voice does run in my head!'

She had scarcely finished her thought when she heard small, hurried footsteps, and in came the unconscious object of that thought.

Maligna could not have told what it was that made her instinctively draw back farther into the shadow. At any other time, and with any other child, she would most likely have taken a strange, weird delight in pouncing suddenly out upon her; but Ruli, although she had no waving wand in her hand, and was quite ignorant of her power, held the wicked old Maligna spell-bound in her corner, as she came, uncertain of step and solemn-faced, through the open doorway.

But what was it that brought Ruli to church alone at that darkening hour of the evening?

Ruli was there on a very solemn errand. She was about to make her little offering to the victims of the flood. She had pondered long and deeply on her mother's words. Yes, even at Ruli's tender age she could ponder, and that deeply. And she had come to the conclusion that perhaps the only thing that was really hers; the only thing the loss of which would be a loss to herself and to herself alone; the only thing it was very, very hard to part with; the only thing, in short, the gift of which could be called a real sacrifice, —was her dear wooden doll. And in purest faith she had come to offer it.

The money-box was rather higher than her short arms could reach. In fact, as she stood beside it, with the devoted doll in her arms, the bottom of the box

barely touched the top of her little worsted hood. But Ruli was a child of much resource, and was not baffled by this fact. She was not long in running to fetch one of the long-backed wooden chairs that stood in a row near the altar. *That* was soon done. But the chair proved both heavy and unwieldy, and when she had laboured back with it as far as the money-box, her little strength, though not her will, was very nearly exhausted, and down came chair, Ruli, doll, and all, on the hard stone with a loud clatter and thump. Ruli picked herself up, glad of a whimper. It was hard to part with her treasure, but it would not be a proper gift to the poor people if she cried over it. Her mother had not cried when she dropped her silver earrings into the box. So the tears that would not fall on the precious wooden doll's account were glad of the excuse of a broken knee-skin, and fell unchecked one by one over her little nose, as with much straining and effort she set the chair on its four legs again, directly in front of the money-box, and proceeded to scramble on to it.

The doll was not large, nor was it overburdened with clothing, and fortunately the slit at the top of the money-box was wide and long—wider and longer by a good deal than was necessary to admit the amount of coins that were generally put into it. The deed was done. Ruli with resolute hands pushed her offering

head foremost through the slit. It fitted rather tightly, it is true, and its charming pink and white complexion must have suffered some severe scratches from the iron-rimmed sides of the slit, as it went through with a creak and a scrunch; but the head once through, the rest of its flat-made little person followed easily after, and very shortly nothing remained to sight but the tip of one wooden foot just above the slit. Long and earnestly did Ruli gaze at the beloved remnant, her little breast heaving, her little eyes brimful of tears, her brave little soul struggling with its load of self-imposed grief. Then, with a courage worthy of a larger frame, she pushed the loved wooden foot away from her with one resolute, fat fore-finger. The doll fell to the bottom of the box. The rest was blackness. And Ruli scrambled off her chair quicker than she had scrambled on, and hurried out of the church. She had forgotten to repeat the little prayer that her mother had taught her. She had forgotten to put back her chair. All she remembered was, that she was going back to a hitherto happy home, in which there was now no dear wooden doll.

Sometime, quite half an hour, afterwards, when the sexton, worthy man, came dawdling up the church steps, jingling his keys together as he went, with the

intention of putting out the lights and shutting the church up for the night, he was nearly startled out of his senses by an apparition which suddenly and unexpectedly pounced out upon him from the shadow inside, and said abruptly in his very face, 'Get me the key of the money-box.'

The sexton gasped, of course, and clutched firm hold of his keys. But even in that uncertain light, Maligna's high-peaked hat, and her bent form, and her brilliant eyes, that shone like a cat's in the dark, were sufficiently distinctive.

'You—you—w-w-want the k-key of the money b-box?' stammered the sexton.

'Yes,' said she, giving him a slight crack over the head with her stick. 'Wake up, can't you? And don't call me "you," you ill-behaved old object! Go and get me the key of the money-box this very instant, or else I'll have you turned out of your place, neck and crop. And perhaps look out for a fresh parson too.'

That was likely enough. Maligna could do it if she pleased. And did she not always please to do cruel things? The key, however, happened to be on the lesser bunch that the sexton carried in his hand; and though his fingers shook as if he had the flood-fever, she was not kept waiting for it beyond her patience.

'Now go about your business,' said she as she snatched it from him. 'Stay outside, and wait for me; do you hear? I want to see what sort of alms-giving goes on among you set of grumblers. But don't expect me to add anything to the sum.'

'I don't!' thought the sexton as he obeyed her orders.

In fact, what he did expect was, that she would take away and pop into her pocket any little sum that might be already there. For the poor, struggling pastor was somewhat behind-hand with some rent due to Maligna, and it would be just like her to wring his heart by appropriating his little store of poor-money. But he was wrong. Maligna, for the first time for many, many long years of hard-heartedness, had a kindly thought.

With quick, restless hands, and a dreadful frown on her face, she opened the money-box with a snap and a pull, looking hurriedly around her as she did so, for fear any one might be observing her.

Yes, there was the martyred doll sure enough, lying at the bottom of the box, her much-scratched head reposing on a couple of pennies. There were one or two silver coins lying here and there, and there were other pennies than those which the doll had selected for a pillow. Sum total—the sum total was not much. Maligna brushed the humble coins away into a corner

with rather a contemptuous smile, but she took the little doll, whose hitherto tranquil and uneventful existence was certainly about to be varied by strange adventures, and pressed her head downwards into one of her enormous pockets, where the poor thing now found herself in company with several huge keys, a half-nibbled nutmeg, a dog-whistle, a rusty donkey-shoe, and a valuable golden snuff-box, much bruised and indented.

Maligna, however, did not stop here. The doll safe in one pocket, she proceeded to fumble, with nervous fingers and cross looks and muttered words, in another pocket, from which she pulled, hastily and stealthily —as if she were picking somebody else's pocket instead of her own—a fat canvas bag, the contents of which, with much more muttering, and frowning, and shaking of the head, she hurriedly emptied into the bottom of the box.

The contents were nothing less than a goodly glittering pile of lovely golden coins.

This done, Maligna banged the lid violently to, turned the key in the lock with a sharp 'click,' and, pulling her hood closer over her face, hurried out of the church.

'And now where are you, you old noodle?' cried she, as she stood waiting and looking round her in the porch.

The sexton, had he been a man of spirit, would not have answered. But he had a wife, and besides that, he knew of seven hungry little mouths that were always wide-open, gaping for food to be popped into them. He might have quarrelled with his own bread and butter, but how could he quarrel with theirs?

So all that he said was, 'Here I am, gracious lady!'

'I'm glad you know your name!' said Maligna, grinning. 'Here is your key. But mind, if you dare open that box, to see if I've left your money all safe or not, I'll send your children a good rousing attack of the mumps. You may fancy I shan't see, and I can't send mumps. Shan't I? and can't I? So, now you know.'

'B-but I d-don't want to—to open the b-b-box.'

'That's lucky for you. Now come and lift me on my horse. I could get on just as well by myself, but I choose you to do something to earn the salt you eat. Gently, now, or I'll bite you. Tell me what sort of people are those—old and little Ruli?'

'Angels!' cried the sexton enthusiastically. 'When my eldest boy nearly died—saving your ladyship's presence—Ruli's mother sat with the boy's mother night after night. She took no rest, and cared for all of us; and Ruli, little Ruli, when my boy's eyes first opened after the long deep sleep that we had feared

was death, and they rested on Ruli, sitting so sweetly and silently at the foot of the bed,—ah! well there! I shall always think that it was that dear fat finger of hers that beckoned him back to life again. I think I can see her now!'

'Then you must have been drinking!' said Maligna, as she gathered up her reins. 'Don't forget to remind your master of what he owes me. Tell him I'll have all his early fruit nipped in the bud if he don't attend to it. And order that lazy wife of yours to make me a large cream-cheese in return for my goodness in not raising your paltry rent. And tell your children to take their fingers out of their mouths and to drop me a curtsey when I pass them,—ill-mannered young louts!—do you hear? Oh, and if they behave themselves, they may collect all the dried fir-cones they can find, and bring them to the castle gate. I like to burn them o' nights, and it will be capital fun for them to pick them up. Now, do you hear?'

Yes, the sexton, poor fellow, heard well enough; and glad was he when Maligna had finished speaking, and he could go home to his wife and children, and comfort himself by telling them of his disagreeable meeting with her.

But imagine for a moment the consternation and

anxiety of mind into which Ruli's mother was thrown, about a week later on, when, without any preliminary tap at her cottage door, it was thrown suddenly wide open, and in hobbled Maligna.

'Ah! there you are,' said she, crumpling up her brows together. 'And there you are too, you romantic baby, you! Come and give me a nice kiss this very minute!'

Ruli's mother held her breath, but Ruli was not afraid. She went straight to the doorway, where Maligna still was standing, and lifted up her innocent round face.

Maligna did not expect this, and was a little taken aback. She did not, however, stoop to kiss her, but she patted the dimpled little cheek kindly enough, and it was easy to see she was pleased. So Ruli's mother breathed more freely.

'I suppose I may walk in and sit down to rest myself?' said Maligna; 'but, of course, if you prefer my room to my company you have only to say so.'

Ruli's mother, however, did not say so. She merely put forward a chair, and closed the door behind Maligna's back.

'And now come here and let me have a look at you,' said Maligna when she was seated.

Ruli's mother went and stood up straight before

her at once, a little puzzled. What could Maligna mean?

'Ah, hem-ho!' said Maligna, smiling grimly; 'so this is a good woman, is it? Well, it's a pale, thin thing to look at. Now tell me, old Ruli, do you consider me a good woman—eh?'

Ruli's mother flushed crimson, of course, and did not answer. The fact was, that the question could not be answered politely and truthfully both.

'Speak out,' said Maligna. 'I desire it. I want to hear your opinion of me. Do you hear me? Do you consider me a good woman, or not?'

'No,' said Ruli's mother gently. 'No, dear lady, I do not.'

There was of course a pause in the conversation after this.

'Upon my word!' cried Maligna presently,—'upon my word you're an odd couple;' and she ended with a little odd snorting sound that might have passed for a laugh.

But the two Rulis stood hand in hand together, the elder Ruli with a beating, troubled heart.

'Of course you only see one side of the story. It doesn't occur to you that I was young once, a mere crawling baby, helpless and harmless. You don't ask yourself through what stages of care and sorrow and

bitter disappointment I must have reached as far as this on my lonely journey. You don't ask yourself what thunder-cloud it was that turned all *my* pans of fresh cream sour, one after the other. It seems easy to you to be good and happy when one is rich. Is it? If I had found that the flowers grew where I had watered the ground so carefully, if I had reaped the harvest where I had sown the seed so lavishly, well, then I might have believed in charity and goodness. But I didn't. There isn't one of those boors down yonder that wouldn't take as his right all the greatest gifts I could shower on him, and snap his fingers at me the very minute my back was turned. They'd cringe their body off their own legs for twopence; and what should I get for my twopence, pray? Nothing, not even bare gratitude! That's why I never do anything for nothing. If I'm to give my money that I don't want and they do, I must be paid my own price for it. They can't give my own price. But you, poor as you are, you can give me my price.'

'I can? Oh, surely you must be jesting!' cried the elder Ruli, much and strangely agitated.

'Not at all. Listen to me, and let us get to business at once,' said Maligna. 'Of course I come here on business. You don't suppose I can spare the time to go pottering about amusing myself?' Whereupon she

came a little nearer to Ruli's mother and laid one hand on her arm, and spoke strongly, emphasizing her words with her fingers: 'Would you like to see dams built up all the length of the low-lying lands that border the river? Not much of a river, but awkward in its ways sometimes. Would you care to see a lock or two placed here and there to keep back the water when it wants to run away in summer? and a reservoir made? Would you be pleased to see the church repaired and re-decorated? Would you be glad if the poor people's unwholesome huts in the village were to be rebuilt, and their fields sown with good seed, at no expense to themselves? Would you like to see a new school built, and a free infirmary? Do you yearn in your soul that peace and plenty may reign in your native village? Do you, in short, love your neighbour as yourself? or are the words a sham and a pretence?'

'I should be indeed glad if all this could be,' said Ruli's mother, 'but'—

'But what? You would not sacrifice one single blessing of your own, so that they might all be blessed through you?'

'I did not say so,' said Ruli's mother, in a low voice.

'What would you give so that all that might come to pass?' asked Maligna.

The tears sprang to the poor woman's eyes.

'Oh! why, why do you ask me that?' cried she, wringing her hands.

'Don't wring your hands! what's the good of that? Wringing your hands won't help your fellow-men. Answer me at once,' cried Maligna, stamping her crutch impatiently on the floor.

For some moments the elder Ruli could not speak. She was choking. Presently, however, she commanded herself.

'What is your price?' asked she faintly.

'My price? Only Ruli.'

'Ruli! my Ruli! oh! never, never!' cried her mother, falling on her knees, and snatching her little one convulsively to her. 'How can you ask such a thing of me?'

'Hoity-toity! I don't ask it. I only propose a bargain. You don't accept it? Very well; only don't insult me. I don't think I should eat her, unless she were very, very naughty. The fact is, I've taken a fancy for her, that's all. She's odd and quaint, and she would amuse me. Besides, she would live like a little princess. You find her very sweet? Well, so do I.'

But Ruli's mother still crouched on the ground, hiding her face in Ruli's little pinafored breast.

'Of course,' said Maligna, rising to go, 'if that's all the sacrifice you good people are willing to make for their fellow-creatures, why, it's not much. And I don't give that for goodness!' added she, snapping her fingers. 'Have your own way. Let the people die of ague and fever. Let the village lie six feet under water every winter. Let the corn rot in the ground for want of it in summer. Let the fruits blossom, wither away, and fall to the earth. Let the children grow up weak and ignorant. Let them all go to rack and ruin, in fact, provided you are snug and safe. Is that it?—eh? Very well. And now, good day to you.'

'But—one moment!' cried Ruli's mother, catching hold of the retreating Maligna's petticoats. 'Do you know the enormity of the sacrifice you demand of me? Can you fathom the desolation of my life without her? Have you measured the depth, and the breadth, and the width of the loss to me?'

'Yes; I *have* measured it by the knowledge of the gain it would be to myself,' said Maligna, almost gently. 'I see that you are the only woman who has not prejudiced her little child's mind against me. In Ruli's eye I am not an object of horror and aversion. I don't know why, but it seems to me that if I could win her love I might die happier. Ruli is not afraid

of me. Ruli trusted me. If I do not win her love now, she will grow up in this village, and she will learn to hate me. The thought of that—Pshaw! fancy my condescending to explain to you! May I have Ruli, or may I not?'

'But, but—oh! I will try to see aright. Perhaps it is Heaven's will. Perhaps Ruli was given to me for this purpose! How can I judge? But, but—tell me—shall I never see my child again?'

'Rubbish! Of course you would, when the works are all ended. The harder the workmen work, the sooner would you see Ruli. Only it will be a matter of a year or so. We can't build a village in a day, or win a child's love!'

'You can win that in an hour!' cried Ruli's mother hotly.

'I will see; but you must give me Ruli entirely and unquestionably for the whole time the works are going on. Now, make haste and decide. I give you while I count twenty.' And Maligna counted rapidly aloud—'One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen,—take care!—fifteen, sixteen, seventeen,—make up your mind!—eighteen, nine'—

'Stop!' cried the poor woman; 'you may have Ruli.'

'Very well,' said Maligna quietly. 'Send her up to the castle gate to-morrow week, at eight o'clock in the morning. Will she come quietly?'

'She will walk through fire if I tell her,' said her mother with a sob. 'And you, on your part, when will you set the men to work? When will you send the seed, and the clothes, and the food to all yonder starving souls?'

'To-morrow week,' said Maligna. 'As you bring the child to my gates, when you are half-way up the hill, look back across the river plain. If I have not kept to my word, take back your baby.'

Ruli's mother sank to her knees, weeping bitterly, and bowed her head in her hands.

When she looked up again, Maligna was gone.

And in a week and a day Ruli and her mother went up to the castle gate, a little bundle of homely clothes hanging on one arm, and a little pet white pigeon sitting on one shoulder; 'for,' said her mother, 'the good Lady Maligna looks fierce, but she is, oh, so fond of little children! and she will surely let you keep your bird if you ask her prettily. But, Ruli, if you are ever in any danger, if you are ill, or—or any one should be cruel to you, tie one of your little garters round its neck and let it fly. When I see that,

I shall know you want me, and I will come to you, Ruli.' 'Yes,' cried she, with brimming eyes; 'yes, my Ruli, though a thousand iron gateways should stand between us!' But don't let the pigeon fly if you are only sad and lonely, and would like to see me; for we have all our appointed weary hours to get through in this life, and Heaven is best pleased when we bear them patiently. Go to Maligna with all your troubles. Oh, dear Ruli, you have such powerful friends in your own good ways and your tender kisses! But do not forget me—do not forget me!' cried she, suddenly and despairingly.

'No, no; I won't,' said Ruli placidly. 'Of course I won't. Oh! what's that? what's that down there?'

They stopped to look. The busy labourers were already working in the river plain. Flitting in and out of the short, stunted trees, they looked in the distance like so many bees.

'There they are in the village too,' said Ruli's mother, sighing heavily. 'Oh, if Maligna had not kept her word!'

And as they stood silent and watching, they could hear the dull thud of falling earth and the bright sound of hammers, and the tramp of feet and the busy hum of voices.

'Come, Ruli,' said her mother; 'we must do our part too.'

Great was everybody's amazement when they learnt what was being done—when they found that the whole village was to be altered and renovated. This amazement almost amounted to anxiety when the important river works were commenced, and the long wished-for dams and locks grew bigger and bigger every week; a feeling of anxiety that gave place to terrified consternation, when Maligna's carts and Maligna's men went silently about from door to door, leaving little sacks of seed and new strong sets of field and garden tools at each one.

As for the gates that were re-hinged and re-painted, the roofs that were re-thatched, and the wells that were cleaned out, they were without number. What alarmed them was the thought of how and when Maligna intended to be repaid for all she was doing for them. That she intended to be paid in one way or another, possibly in greatly increased rent and taxes, they never doubted. And in this conjecture they were right. Only it never seemed possible of belief to them that she intended to be satisfied with the price she had asked, namely, two or three short years of the mere baby-sweetness of a little child.

But Maligna had never been quite so black as she had painted herself. There had always been a very small spot in her heart that was yet fresh and green. She had not known even herself of its existence until baby Ruli's charity, when she had fallen from her horse, and baby Ruli's simple, unquestioning faith, in the sacrifice of her loved doll, had brought a tear into her old eyes. Then she knew that all love of goodness had not left her. For as the tree that is dead has no more leaves to give, so the heart that is quite barren has no more tears to shed.

Maligna, startled and agitated, had rubbed hers impatiently away. But the tear had already fallen, and the little green spot in her heart had grown one tiny shade larger.

Meanwhile the poor people in the village, when they at last took in the fact to their minds that Ruli's imprisonment in the dreaded old castle depended on their own energy and industry, worked as perhaps they would not have worked for themselves; and so Ruli's mother reaped the reward of her own past goodness to them.

And the village grew, firm and white, like an unexpected mushroom in the fields. A year was gone. The river now flowed evenly between its new banks.

There was every prospect of a good harvest later on; and while the people still worked with unabated zeal, hope, like the sweet green corn peeping through the fragrant brown earth, crept up from between the loneliness and dreariness of old Ruli's desolate heart, and grew there unchecked. For the white pigeon had never come back.

Wonder was, of course, rife as to what Ruli was doing for the old witch during the years of her marvellous self-sacrifice, so that she should have gained such inestimable benefits for her fellow-creatures in the village. Some thought her dead long since, and spoke with lowered voices of the poor mother's grief to come. Others fancied her growing up wicked and lawless, and full of evil deeds as was Maligna herself. Others in their minds' eye saw her, and with their tongues' wag spoke of her, as suffering tortures unheard of, a prey to daily inflictions and nightly terrors, her fat baby face thinned, and her rich baby spirits broken. Ruli's mother had more faith, else how could she have let her go? Night and morning she commended Ruli to the all-sufficient care of Heaven; and that done, she could live her life and possess her troubled soul in patience.

As for Ruli, what did she do? She rose early, and scrambled forthwith, fresh and rosy, on to Maligna's

great curtained bed, where she said her prayers out loudly and clearly, and then ate her breakfast of milk and bread with great relish. She had cried incessantly for her mother at first; now less often; but she had not forgotten her, and twenty times a day did Maligna promise her that she should see her again some day soon. And Ruli, never having been deceived by her mother, knew not what false promises meant. Maligna's word, therefore, was enough. Besides, it was well known what a reasonable creature Ruli was. She walked in the castle grounds with Maligna, hand in hand, and chattered incessantly; and while they leant over the parapet of the castle grounds, told her unconscious stories of the distress of the poor creatures that grew like stunted weeds in the village below. She informed Maligna, too, that her high-peaked hat was ugly in the extreme, and asked her why she wore it. She smoothed Maligna's wrinkles with her two little hands, and told her that she found her much improved by the operation. She ate her fill, and laughed to her full content. She wandered through the castle rooms, and left rays of sunlight about them, in the shape of broken toys, pieces of torn books, or half-nibbled apples, and maybe a careless little lost garter here, or a cast-off soiled pinafore there. She lay, too, in Maligna's lap at evening time, after her supper of milk

and bread, and snored sweet little snores with her rosebud-mouth wide open. That's all Ruli did.

But nevertheless the green spot in Maligna's heart grew bigger and bigger day by day. Maligna was Maligna still—a sour, disappointed, disagreeable woman. But not for the riches of the whole wide world itself would she have shaken, willingly, Ruli's unbounded confidence in her. Ruli had given her doll for others. Ruli's mother had given Ruli herself. Maligna had not been able to terrify them out of their faith in Heaven; and she knew it.

At last, in two years' time—alas for poor old Ruli's patience, in no less time than that—the works were done. The village was a new village. The people were a happy, flourishing people. The church was a church, and not a tumble-down hovel. The river was a river, and not a wayward, capricious torrent. The harvest had been plentiful. To do Maligna but bare justice, her money had been spent freely and judiciously. And there had been no mystery, no concealment about it. Ruli's two sweetest years was the price paid for all this, and Maligna knew that the price paid had been a large one.

But there was one mystery, though it was not a great one.

On the high road, away from the village, stood a new commodious building, which everybody knew to be the much-wished-for infirmary for the sick. The doctor belonging to a little town not many miles distant was appointed visiting doctor. The nurses had been chosen from amongst the village women. The beds were ready. The whole place looked comfortable enough to render a mild attack of indisposition quite an enjoyable thing. But the infirmary had not been named! Over the principal doorway was a niche, and in this niche was a statue; but it was hidden from public gaze by a clinging white cloth.

'Little Saint Ruli, of course,' said a great many, smiling.

'Or perhaps Saint Maligna!' said others, smiling too, but differently.

That night, however,—the night that the last of the workmen had been paid off, and had gathered their tools together, and had finished clearing away all the last remaining chips, and shavings, and loose bits of wood and brick,—that night, just as poor old Ruli's patience was ebbing away, and she was on her knees by the child's empty bedstead, sobbing bitterly, there came a knock at the door.

'Come in,' said she.

The door opened gently, and a voice said, 'Here's Ruli!'

How can one write of such moments as these? There was a cry, of course, and a rush, and a blinding flood of tears. For some moments neither of the Rulis could speak,—young Ruli because she was half-stifled with kisses; old Ruli because—because—ah! should she ever find her voice again?

It was some time before Maligna could make herself heard, but she repeated over and over again triumphantly her little series of questions: 'Is she thin? Is she pale, eh? Does she look starved or unhappy, eh? Has she forgotten you? Am I fit to be trusted with a baby, or am I not, eh? Answer me that.'

But nobody could answer anything. Be assured that those were happy moments for all, even for Maligna. Indeed, perhaps for Maligna they were more precious than for the others.

Certain it is, that as Ruli's mother grew calmer, Maligna grew more and more agitated, and at last broke down entirely.

'Yes, yes!' cried she, throwing herself on her old

knees before bewildered Ruli, and catching her passionately in her trembling old arms; 'now you have mother again, you will forget old Maligna. Maligna must go back to her lonely home. Maligna is nobody now. Maligna's poor old heart has been warmed again, only to be cut up in little pieces and stewed with butter and parsley, I suppose. The works are done. Ruli is home again. Maligna may go back to her old castle and keep company with the mice and watch them nibbling the very boots off her old toes.' And then, turning to the scarcely less bewildered mother—'I can't give her up!' cried she. 'I can't! You've done your part, and I've done mine. And you think I can go home content? Can't you come and live at the castle, both of you? Let Ruli love me a little; she will always love you best!'

Old Ruli smiled. She knew that.

'The castle's a nice place,' said Ruli composedly.

'And I'm getting so old!' said Maligna.

'We will divide Ruli,' said her mother, smiling again. 'Let me watch her while she's asleep, let me nurse her when she's ill, let me dry her tears when they fall, and I will give all her smiles to you, dear lady! Will that do?'

Maligna jumped to her feet and stared. Her tears were dry in a moment from sheer astonishment. Then

presently she stamped her crutch down on the ground in uncontrollable emotion, and cried out vehemently, 'There's something in goodness after all!'

The next day—ah! the next day—was a rather remarkable day certainly.

The news of Ruli's arrival had spread like wild-fire in the village, and everybody was eager to see her, and to thank her, and to question her.

But Maligna and the two Rulis had gone up the hill again, and made much of themselves together; and by and by, in the early morning of next day, a herald, seated on a cream-white horse, rode through the excited village, and made his proclamation at the principal corners, and in the market-place; the proclamation being to the effect that the gracious Lady Maligna and her adopted grand-daughter would that day ride through the village to receive the thanks and the affectionate welcome of the villagers. The proclamation hinted further on that the people might make as much noise as they pleased. Useless permission! How could they have possibly kept silent when Maligna and old Ruli, riding side by side on richly-caparisoned mules, presented themselves at the commencement of the long village street? The one still in her old peaked hat, it is true, but smiling and

bowing as pleasantly as she knew how; and the latter in her humble, white cotton cap, with red and swollen eyes and a much-abashed face. And when Ruli, fat, smiling, and delighted, followed them on a little grey pony literally covered with white flowers and blue ribbons, how was it possible not to crowd round her, shouting and laughing and crying all at once? The pony's white and blue decorations had left him for ever in the first two minutes' progress of the little procession, and were transferred to a hundred different button-holes!

The shouts were not at first for Maligna, it is true. They were for the faithful souls whose simple devotion had won them so many unhoped-for blessings. But these heartfelt greetings warmed their hearts, and when they saw that Maligna listened, not unpleased, to their loving welcome to Ruli, they forgot the long years of neglect and cruelty. They forgot what they had suffered. Maligna was a wicked fairy no longer. The castle was an abode of terror no longer. Ruli loved the one, and had lived peacefully in the other; and the bright light from Heaven, that surely had rested on Ruli, must have rested on Maligna too.

Up rose the shout:

'Maligna! Maligna for ever! Long live our good lady!'

And Maligna, shaking her head, half amazed, half suspicious, yet much gratified, tasted of the rare sweets of popularity.

But the greatest surprise of all was the splendid banquet which was given by Maligna that very afternoon to the whole village, in the grounds of the until then much-dreaded castle. And the greatest pleasure of all was the speech she made to them when the banquet was over.

'Once upon a time, many, many years ago,' said she, 'a flower sprang from the earth in the winter-time, and showed its struggling little head through the white fallen snow. It was not a happy flower, for it grew alone, in the midst of a vast deserted waste of land; and it had no companions to measure its growth by, to feel sorry with it when the winds blew or the rain fell, or to be glad with it when the sun shone and the pleasant dew-drops lay cool and sparkling on its leaves.

'It grew indeed very fast, and soon became a strong plant, but it did not grow either straight or pretty; and that grieved it sorely, for it would have given much to grow like the other plants.

'By and by the neglected plant grew so tall, and the thick, prickly thorns grew so close together on its stem, and it was altogether, it appeared, so displeasing

a plant, that the people who passed by it warned their children not to touch it, for that it would burn their little hands most painfully if they did. And the general opinion was, that it would be a very good thing when the time should come for the ill weed to wither away and die, and to leave the room it took up in the earth to be filled by lovelier plants.

'One day a little girl was compelled (no matter how or why) to grasp this dreadful plant in her two soft hands. She did it fearlessly, bravely! And then, to every one's infinite astonishment, she called out, "Why, it doesn't hurt a bit!"

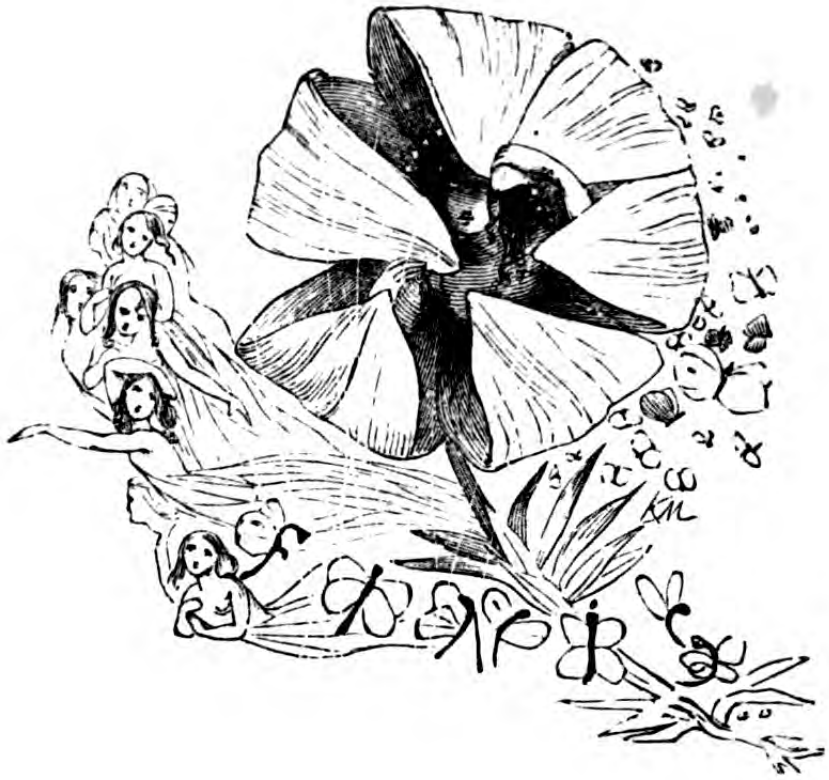
'Will you too, all of you,' continued Maligna earnestly,—'will you too grasp the old plant firmly and fearlessly? Will you learn for yourselves that though the marks of the thorns may still be there yet, the thorns themselves are gone for ever—stripped from the rugged old stem by that little girl's soft hands? Or will you suffer that poor old plant to wither away gradually, unloved and unregretted?'

Here Maligna broke down, greatly agitated.

No one could speak. And there was neither shouting or cheering at the conclusion of Maligna's speech, but there was something far better. There were full hearts and wet eyes, and kindly forgiving thoughts and sweet new hopes springing up in every thankful breast.

By and by everybody went home, of course ; but the two Rulis lived at the castle ever afterwards.

As for the saint in the niche, it was nothing more or less than Ruli's little wooden doll. And the hospital is called 'Doll's Hospital' to this very day. It was a very little thing that Ruli had done, but she had done it with all her heart, and therein lay its strength.



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