Drolls from Shadowland

J. H. Pearce


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The Man who could talk with the Birds

DROLLS
FROM SHADOWLAND

BY

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THE MAN WHO COINED HIS BLOOD INTO GOLD.

THE yoke of Poverty galled him exceedingly, and he hated his taskmistress with a most rancorous hatred.

As he climbed up or down the dripping ladders, descending from sollar to sollar towards the level where he worked, he would set his teeth grimly that he might not curse aloud—an oath underground being an invitation to the Evil One—but in his heart the muffled curses were audible enough. And when he was at work in the dreary level, with the darkness lying on his shoulder like a hand, and the candles shining unsteadily through the gloom, like little evil winking eyes, he brooded so moodily over his bondage to Poverty, that he desired to break from it at any cost.

"I'd risk a lem for its weight in gowld: darned ef I wedn'!" he muttered savagely, as he dug at the stubborn rock with his pick.

He could hear the sounds of blasting in other levels—the explosions travelling to him in a muffled boom—and above him, for he was working beneath the bed of the ocean, he could faintly distinguish the grinding of the sea as the huge waves wallowed and roared across the beach.

"I'm sick to death o' this here life," he grumbled; "I'd give a haand or a' eye for a pot o' suvrins. Iss, I'd risk more than that," he added darkly: letting the words ooze out as if under his breath.

At that moment his pick detached a piece of rock which came crashing down on the floor of the level, splintering into great jagged fragments as it fell.

He started back with an exclamation of uncontrollable surprise. The falling rock had disclosed the interior of a cavern whose outlines were lost in impenetrable gloom, but which here and there in a

vague fashion, as it caught the light of the candle flickering in his hat, seemed to sparkle as if its walls were crusted with silver.

"Lor' Jimmeny, this es bra' an' queer!" he gasped.

As he leaned on his pick, peering into the cavern with covetous eyes, but with a wildly-leaping heart, he was aware of an odd movement among the shadows which were elusively outlined by the light of his dip.

It was almost as though some of them had an independent individuality, and could have detached themselves from their roots if they wished.

It was certain a squat, hump-backed blotch, that was sprawling blackly beside a misshapen block, was either wriggling on the floor as if trying to stand upright . . . or else there was something wrong with his eyes.

He stared at the wavering gloom in the cavern, with its quaint, angular splashes of glister, where heads of quartz and patches of mundic caught the light from the unsteady flame of the candle, and presently he was *certain* that the shadows were alive.

Most of all he was sure that the little hump-backed oddity had risen to its feet and was a veritable creature: an actual uncouth, shambling grotesque, instead of a mere flat blotch of shadow.

Up waddled the little hump-back to the hole in the wall where Joel stood staring, leaning on his pick.

"What can I do for'ee, friend?" he asked huskily: his voice sounding faint, hoarse, and muffled, as if it were coming from an immense distance, or as if the squat little frame had merely borrowed it for the nonce.

Joel stared at the speaker, with his lower jaw dropping.

"What can I do for'ee, friend?" asked the hump-back; peering at the grimy, half-naked miner, with his little ferrety eyes glowing luminously.

Joel moistened his lips with his tongue before he answered. "Nawthin', plaise, sir," he gasped out, quakingly.

"Nonsense, my man!" said the hump-back pleasantly, rubbing his hands cheerfully together as he spoke. And Joel noticed that the fingers, though long and skinny—almost wrinkled and lean enough, in fact, to pass for claws—were adorned with several sparkling rings. "Nonsense, my man! I'm your friend—if you'll let me be. O never mind my hump, if it's that that's frightening you, I got that through a fall a long while ago," and the lean brown face puckered into a smile. "Come! In what way can I oblige'ee, friend? I can grant you any wish you like. Say the word—and it's done! Just think what you could do if you had heaps of money, now—piles of suvrins in that owld chest in your bedroom, instead o' they paltry two-an'-twenty suvrins which you now got heeded away in the skibbet."

Joel stared at the speaker with distended eyes: the great beads of perspiration gathering on his forehead.

"How ded'ee come to knaw they was there?" he asked.

"I knaw more than that," said the hump-back, laughing. "I could tell'ee a thing or two, b'leeve, if I wanted to. I knaw tin,[A] cumraade, as well as the next." And with that he began to chuckle to himself.

"Wedn'ee like they two-an'-twenty suvrins in the skibbet made a hunderd-an'-twenty?" asked the hump-back insinuatingly.

"Iss, by Gosh, I should!" said Joel.

"Then gi'me your haand on it, cumraade; an' you shall have 'em!"

"Here goes, then!" said Joel, thrusting out his hand.

The hump-back seized the proffered hand in an instant, covering the grimy fingers with his own lean claws.

"Oh, le'go! *le'go!*" shouted Joel.

The hump-back grinned; his black eyes glittering.

"I waan't be niggardly to'ee, cumraade," said he. "Every drop o' blood you choose to shed for the purpose shall turn into a golden suvrin for'ee—there!"

"Darn'ee! thee ben an' run thy nails in me—see!"

And Joel shewed a drop of blood oozing from his wrist.

"Try the charm, man! Wish! Hold un out, an' say, *Wan!*"

Joel held out his punctured wrist mechanically.

"Wan!"

There was a sudden gleam—and down dropped a sovereign: a bright gold coin that rang sharply as it fell.

"Try agen!" said the hump-back, grinning delightedly.

Joel stooped first to pick up the coin, and bit it eagerly.

"Ay, good Gosh! 'tes gowld, sure 'nuff!"

"Try agen!" said the hump-back "Make up a pile!"

Joel held out his wrist and repeated the formula.

"Wan!"

And another coin clinked at his feet.

"I needn' wait no longer, s'pose?" said the hump-back.

"Wan!" cried Joel. And a third coin dropped.

He leaned on his pick and kept coining his blood eagerly, till presently there was quite a little pile at his feet.

The hump-back watched him intently for a time: but Joel appeared to be oblivious of his presence; and the squat little figure stealthily disappeared.

The falling coins kept chiming melodiously, till presently the great stalwart miner had to lean against the wall of the level to support himself. So tired as he was, he had never felt before. But give over his task he either could not, or would not. The chink of the gold-pieces he must hear if he died for it. He looked down at them greedily. "Wan! . . . Wan! . . . Wan! . . ."

Presently he tottered, and fell over on his heap.

At that same moment the halting little hump-back stole out from the shadows immediately behind him, and leaned over Joel, rubbing his hands gleefully.

"I must catch his soul," said the little black man.

And with that he turned Joel's head round sharply, and held his hand to the dying man's mouth.

Just then there fluttered up to Joel's lips a tiny yellow flame, which, for some reason or other, seemed as agitated as if it had a human consciousness. One might almost have imagined it perceived the little hump-back, and knew full well who and what he was.

But there on Joel's lips the flame hung quivering. And now a deeper shadow fell upon his face.

Surely the tiny thing shuddered with horror as the hump-back's black paws closed upon it!

But, in any case, it now was safely prisoned. And the little black man laughed long and loudly.

"Not so bad a bargain after all!" chuckled he.

FOOTNOTE:

[A] To "*knaw tin*" is among the miners of Cornwall a sign of, and a colloquial euphemism for, *cleverness*.

AN UNEXPECTED JOURNEY.

THE performance was over: the curtain had descended and the spectators had dispersed.

There had been a slight crush at the doors of the theatre, and what with the abrupt change from the pleasant warmth and light of the interior to the sharp chill of the night outside, Preston shivered, and a sudden weakness smote him at the joints.

The crowd on the pavement in front of the theatre melted away with unexampled rapidity, in fact, seemed almost to waver and disappear as if the *mise en scène* had changed in some inexplicable way.

A hansom drove up, and Preston stepped into it heavily, glancing drowsily askance at the driver as he did so.

Seated up there, barely visible in the gloom, the driver had an almost grisly aspect, humped with waterproof capes, and with such a lean, white face. Preston, as he glanced at him, shivered again.

The trap-door above him opened softly, and the colourless face peered down at him curiously.

"Where to, sir?" asked the hollow voice.

Preston leaned back wearily. "Home," he replied.

It did not strike him as anything strange or unusual, that the driver asked no questions but drove off without a word. He was very weary, and he wanted to rest.

The sleepless hum of the city was abidingly in his ears, and the lamps that dotted the misty pavements stared at him blinkingly all along the route. The tall black buildings rose up grimly into the night; the faces that flitted to and fro along the pavements, kept ever sliding past him, melting into the darkness; and the cabs and 'buses,

still astir in the streets, had a ghostly air as they vanished in the gloom.

Preston lay back, weary in every joint, a drowsy numbness settling on his pulse. He had faith in his driver: he would bring him safely home.

Presently they were at one of the wharves beside the river: Preston could hear the gurgle of the water around the piles.

Not this way had he ever before gone homeward. He looked out musingly on the swift, black stream.

"Just in time: we can go down with the tide," said a voice.

Preston would have uttered some protest, but this sluggishness overpowered him: it was as if he could neither lift hand nor foot. The inertia of indifference had penetrated into his bones.

Presently he was aware that he had entered a barge that lay close against the wharf, heaving on the tide. And, as if it were all a piece of the play, the lean old driver, with his dead-white face, had the oars in his hands and stood quietly facing him, guiding the dark craft down the stream.

The panorama of the river-bank kept changing and shifting in the most inexplicable manner, and Preston was aware of a crowd of pictures ever coming and going before his eyes: as if some subtle magician, standing behind his shoulder, were projecting for him, on the huge black screen of night, the most marvellous display of memories he had ever contemplated. For they were all memories, or blends of memories, that now rose here on the horizon of his consciousness. There was nothing new in essentials presented to him: but the grouping was occasionally novel to a fault.

The dear old home—the dear old folks! Green hills, with the little white-washed cottage in a dimple of them, and in the foreground the wind-fretted plain of the sea. The boyish games—marbles and hoop-

trundling—and the coming home at dusk to the red-lighted kitchen, where the mother had the tea ready on the table and the sisters sat at their knitting by the fire.

The dear, dear mother! how his pulse yearned towards her! there were tears in his eyes as he thought of her now. Yet, all the same, the quiet of his pulse was profound.

And there was the familiar scenery of his daily life: the ink-stained desks, the brass rails for the books, the ledgers and bank-books, and the files against the walls; and the faces of his fellow-clerks (even the office boy) depicted here before him to the very life.

The wind across the waters blew chilly in his face: he shivered, a numbness settling in his limbs.

His sweet young wife, so loving and gentle—how shamefully he had neglected her, seeking his own pleasure selfishly—there she sat in the familiar chair by the fireside with dear little Daisy dancing on her knee. What a quiet, restful interior it was! He wondered: would they miss him much if he were dead? . . . Above all, would little Daisy understand what it meant when some one whispered to her "*favee is dead*"?

The wavering shadows seemed to thicken around the boat. And the figure at the oars—how lean and white it was: and yet it seemed a good kind of fellow, too, he thought. Preston watched it musingly as the stream bore them onward: the rushing of the water almost lulling him to sleep.

Were they sweeping outward, then, to the unknown sea?

It was an unexpected journey. . . . And he had asked to be taken *home!*

Presently the air grew full of shapes: shadowy shapes with mournful faces; shapes that hinted secrets, with threatenings in their eyes.

If a man's sins, now, should take to themselves bodies, would it not be in some such guise as this they would front and affright him at dead of night?

Preston shivered, sitting there like a mere numb lump.

How much of his wrong-doing is forgiven to a man—and how much remembered against him in the reckoning?

How awful this gruesome isolation was becoming!

Was it thus a man went drifting up to God?

The figure at the oars was crooning softly. It was like the lullaby his mother used to sing to him when he was a child.

There was a breath of freer air—humanity lay behind them—they were alone with Nature on the vast, dim sea.

The numbness crept to the roots of his being. He had no hands to lift; he had no feet to move. His heart grew sluggish: there was a numbness in his brain.

Death stood upright now in the bow before him: and in the east he was aware of a widening breadth of grey.

Would the blackness freshen into perfect day for him . . . or would the night lie hopelessly on him for ever? . . .

The figure drew near—and laid its hand across his eyes. . . .

"Thrown out of the hansom, and the wheels went over him, sir. He was dead in less than five minutes, I should think."

"Cover his face . . . and break it gently to his wife."

THE MAN WHO COULD TALK WITH THE BIRDS.

A TALE TOLD BY THE FIRESIDE.

WANCE upon a time there was a youngster in Zennor who was all'ys geekin'[B] into matters that warn't no use in the world. Some do say 'a was cliver, too, weth it all, an' cut out that there mermaid in the church[C] what the folks do come from miles round to see. Anyway, 'a warn't like 'es brawthers an' sesters, an' 'es folks dedn' knaw what to maake of un, like.

Well, wan day when 'a was wand'rin' about, down to Nancledrea or some such plaace, 'a got 'mong lots o' trees an' bushes an' heerd the cuckoos callin' to ayche awther, an' awther kinds o' birds what was singin' or talkin,' an' all as knawin' as humans, like. So no rest now cud 'a git, poor chuckle-head! for wantin' to larn to spayke weth they.

Well, it warn't long arter that 'a was geekin' as usual round some owld ruined crellas[D] up to Choon, when 'a seed a man weth a long white beard settin' on wan o' the burrows[E] on the hill that are 'longside that owld Quoit[F] up there.

'A was a bowldish piece o' goods, was the youngster, simmin'ly, for 'a dedn' mind the stranyer a dinyun,[G] though 'a *was* like an owld black witch,[H] they do say. Anyhow, the two beginned jawin' together, soon got thick as Todgy an' Tom. An' by-an'-by the stranyer wormed out of un how 'a was all'ys troubled in 'es mind 'cause 'a cudn' onderstaand what the birds was sayin'.

"I'd give anything in the world," says the bucca-davy,[I] "ef I cud onnly larn to spayke weth they."

"Aw, es it so, me dear," said the stranyer: "well, I'll tayche'ee to talk to they, sure 'nuff, ef thee'll come up to that owld Quoit weth me."

"What must I pay'ee?" axed the youngster, bowld-like. For he'd heerd o' cureyus bargains o' this kind, an' 'a dedn' want to risk 'es sawl.

"Nawthin'! Nawthin', me dear!" said the stranyer. "I shall git paid for't in a way o' me awn."

Well, the end of it was, accordin' to the story, that the youngster 'greed to go 'long weth un: so up the two of 'em went to the Quoit.

When they come up to un the stones seemed to oppen, an' they went inside an' found un like a house. But that was hunderds o' years ago. The owld Quoit now es more like a crellas, though 'a still got a bra' gayte rock for a roof.

Anyhow, they went in, 'cordin' to the story; an' there they lived for a number o' years.

But, somehow, when they was wance got in, the youngster cudn' git out agen nohow. 'A cud geek through the cracks, an' see the country an' the people, but the stones wedn' oppen, an' 'a cudn' git out.

But the owld black witch keeped 'es promise to un, an' tayched un all that 'a wanted to knaw.

The craws that croaked on the Quoit in the sunshine, an' the sparrers an' wagtails an' awther kinds o' birds that come flittin' round an' cheepin' to ayche awther, the owld witch tayched un ('cordin' to the story) to onderstaand everything any of 'em said.

Well, at laast 'a got so cliver, ded the youngster, that there warn't no bird but what 'a cud talk to; from the owld black raven, wha's all'ys cryin' "*corpse!*" to the putty li'l robins what wedn' hurt a worm.

But aw! lor' Jimmeny! warn't 'a disappointed when 'a found what 'a'd ben so hankerin' arter warn't wuth givin' a snail's shill to knaw.

He'd ben thinkin', 'fore 'a cud onderstaand them, that what they'd be talkin' about to ayche awther wed be somethin' cureyus an' mighty cliver, all sorts o' strange owld saycrets, s'pose. But 'a found, when 'a come to spayke their language, that instead o' tellin' 'bout haypes o' treasures, an' hunted housen, an' owld queer ways, they was all the time talkin' 'bout their mait or their nestes, an' awther silly jabber like that.

So 'a was mighty disappointed, an' got very law-sperrited, though 'a dedn' like to confess it to the witch.

An' now, thinks the youngster, he'd like to go home agen: an' shaw off 'fore the nayburs, s'pose.

"Well, thee cust go," says the owld witch, grinnin'.

"An' what must I pay'ee for taychin' me?" says the youngster.

"Nawthin', sonny! Nawthin' at all!" says the witch. "I shall git me reward in a way o' me awn."

An' weth that 'a bust out laughin' agen.

Well, anyway, the lad, accordin' to the story, wished un "*good-bye*," an' trudged off home.

But aw! poor dear! when 'a got to Zennor 'a nigh 'pon brok 'es heart weth grief.

He'd ben livin' all alone weth the owld black witch, an' 'a hadn' took no note of what was passin', an' 'a thought 'a was still a youngster, simmin'ly: 'stead o' which 'a was graw'd to an owld, owld man, weth no more pith in 'es bones than a piskey; an' 'a cud hardly manage to crawl to Zennor, 'a was so owld an' palchy[J], an' nigh 'pon blind.

An', wust of all, when 'a got to Zennor everywan who knaw'd un was dead an' gone! 'Es faather an' mawther was up in the churchyard, an' 'a hadn' got a single friend in the world!

So because 'a was so owld an' terrible palchy, an' hadn' got nowan to taake no int'rest in un, through never havin' took no int'rest in nowan, they was obliged to put un up to Maddern Union; an' there 'a lingered, owld an' toatlish,[K] 'tell 'a died at laast a lone owld man.

FOOTNOTES:

[B] Prying.

[C] The mermaid, with glass and comb and with the tail of a fish, which is carved on a bench-end in Zennor church.

[D] Ancient hut-dwellings.

[E] Barrows.

[F] Cromlech. The term is derived from the legendary belief that these rude megalithic monuments were used by the giants when playing quoits.

[G] A little bit, in the least.

[H] In Cornwall *witch* is both masculine and feminine. The *black* witch exercises the most potent magic; the *white* witch being vastly inferior in power.

[I] Fool.

[J] Weak.

[K] Silly.

THE PURSUIT.

IT began when I was a lad at the country day-school, struggling to hold my own among the scholars in my class.

If I could only always be perfect in my lessons, and among the foremost (if not the first) in the examinations; then, at least, I thought, I should see Her face to face.

But these good things befell me—possibly undeservedly—and though I swelled beneath my coat with inward satisfaction, *She* was still far off: a phantom on the hills.

Then it struck me that if I went to dear Mother Nature she would tell me of this daughter of hers—so enchanting, yet so shy—and I might even one day surprise Her on the hill-slopes, or meet Her as She wandered among the green, winding lanes.

So I presently became a haunter of the tree-clad valleys, of the prattling brooks with the meadowsweet drooping over them, and of the lone, bleak hills where the great wind growled.

Many mornings did I steal out long before the sunrise in order to watch the stars die out in the dawning and the red bars glow in the palpitating east. And when, standing among the firs in the windy plantation, I saw the huge sun rear its head and flood the world with splendour, and heard the birds sing jubilantly, almost breathless with delight, I have fancied I felt the breath of the Beloved One on my cheek and Her heart beating wildly and tremulously against my own. But it was only fancy. Presently the singing dwindled and became fainter: the air grew hot beneath the aromatic fir-boughs: and when, in the distance, the flood of dazzling sunlight dashed redly on the window-panes of the village cottages, I knew I must descend from the haunted hill-top and return to the more prosaic details of life. If She had flown past me, brushing me with Her garments in passing, I had not yet discovered Her as a possession that I could grasp.

Then I said to myself, I shall find Her among my girl-friends: among their rustling garments I shall hear *Her* garments rustle; and from among the laughing eyes with which they bewilder me, I shall no doubt be able to single out *Hers*.

I chose the pleasantest of the maidens who fluttered through my world; and I knew her beautiful, and I believed her to be true. But that old clown Circumstance was piping in the market-place, shewing his cheap-jack wares to catch the fancies of the maidens, and my sweetheart, caught in the excitement of the moment, presently paid down for one of his flashy baubles no less a price than her own young heart.

Then I said, I will look abroad in the market-place myself. Through the clatter of feet and the babble of many voices, I may perhaps catch a whisper, a hint of Her presence. Possibly She may love the eager haunts of men even more than She loves the silent haunt of the wood-dove and the great wide moors where the kite circles slowly. I will move among my fellows and will search for Her there.

But the market-place with its thud, thud, thud of many feet, and its clatter of vehicles, and its buzz of many voices, was a busy spot, and the pleasures were very cheap ones: and not here could I manage to get a glimpse of Her face.

I looked in the shops, and I stood beside the hawkers, and I listened to the sellers and gossiped with those who bought; but the noise, and the heat, and the dust that rose so thickly, were more than I had bargained for, and I felt lonely and disillusioned: so I very lamely turned my back on it all, and went away feeling that I should never find Her there.

Then I built for myself a study into which I gathered covetously the most perfect vintage of the human intellect—the ripest fruit our wise race has garnered during all the years it has been harvesting from time. And here I sat me down waiting for my Belovèd. She will surely show Her face to me here, said I.

The wind rattled the casement; the lamp-flame shook tremulously; and the fire burned cheerfully in the grotesque-tiled grate. I could hear the rain viciously swishing against the window-panes and gurgling unmelodiously through the gutters and from the pipes, but She whom I desired came not to keep me company.

For all the feast I have gathered for us, and for all the comfort I have secured for Her, She holds aloof, and I have never seen Her yet.

And sometimes now I fancy that possibly I may never see Her: but that one day, when I am lying in my coffin, She will press Her lips to mine—and I shall never know.

A PLEASANT ENTERTAINMENT.

"I HAVE here," said the Showman, "the most interesting entertainment to be witnessed on earth! Walk up! walk up, and judge for yourselves!" And with that he beat the drum and blew shrilly on the pipes.

The music travelled to the ears of his audience with a difference: or so it seemed to them, as they stood before the booth. Some heard in it, through the discordant hubbub of the fair, the rattle of vehicles and the tramp of feet in the busy thoroughfares of a great city; for others, it was the whistling of birds in the hedgerows; and to some, like the restless pulsations of the sea. To each, according to his memories and his mood. But the music of the Showman was a single tune for all.

"Walk up! walk up!" bawled the grey-coated Showman, blowing at the pipes and pounding on the drum.

"Darned if I wouldn't go in, if I had the brass!" quoth a lean, unshaven, shabby-looking man, who stood in front of the booth with his hands in his pockets.

"I'll stand treat, if you like!" cried a sunken-eyed young woman, whose cheap and much-bedraggled finery matched aptly enough with her wan and haggard countenance. It was the impulse of a moment, but she was the puppet of impulse and danced on the wires at the slightest touch of chance.

"Right you are!" cried the man.

And they mounted the steps together.

"It's like going up to the altar, isn't it?" giggled the woman to her companion.

"More like going up to the gallows," growled the man.

The Showman rattled the coins as he pocketed them, and flinging aside the canvas admitted them to the booth.

The interior was enveloped in a dim obscurity; hardly deep enough to be counted as darkness, but oppressive enough to slow the pulses of both. There was, however, at one end of the booth a large disc projected on the obscurity: a pale, empty, weirdly-lighted circle, which they stared at dumbly, with wonder in their eyes.

"Is this some darned fool's joke?" growled the man.

"Hush!" said the woman, "the entertainment has commenced."

And, true enough, the disc at which they had been staring had already a stirring, as of life, across its surface.

They were aware of a couple of enthralling faces fronting them side by side on the disc.

One was a woman's face, exquisitely beautiful, with soft blue eyes, full of the most charming gaiety, and with lips as sweetly winsome as a child's: the other was a man's face, proud and handsome, the mouth set firmly, the eyes full of thought.

"Such a face I had dreamed of as my own," sighed the woman.

"So I had imagined I might have been," mused the man.

And then the scenes on the disc began to wax and dwindle rapidly; like the momentary clinging, and as rapid vanishing, of breath across a mirror of polished steel.

There was a vague fluttering and interchange of images; an elusive, intangible influx of suggestions, and an equally dreamy efflux of the same.

A young girl growing into beautiful womanhood, well-dressed, shapely, sought eagerly in marriage, admired by the opposite sex,

and envied by her own. Then a woman in the prime of her powers of enjoyment—with her charms undiminished and her wishes ripened—wedded, and successfully shaping her life: a woman blessed greatly, and very happy.

And side by side with these dream-fancies, or imaginings, went those of a young man facing the world gallantly; surmounting every obstacle easily, and conquering hearts as if by a spell. There was success for him in every scene on which he entered: he was proud and admired, and very haughty, and very rich.

Presently, as if through some dexterous sleight of hand, the pictures of his wooing blended waveringly and dimly with the pictures which emerged for the bedraggled woman who stood beside the loafer in front of the disc.

In the church, when the wedding-march was being played, and in the vignettes of domestic happiness that ensued, the faces and scenes mysteriously coalesced.

For the two spectators, who watched the shifting pictures breathlessly, there were no longer four figures in the scene, but only two.

"Some such future I had imagined for myself," the man muttered.

And the woman mused amazedly: "These were day-dreams of my own."

The disc became obscured, as if their eyes were blurred mistily.

The woman gulped down something: and the man clenched his teeth.

There was a sudden exquisite clarity in the pictures. They were looking at a cluster of white-washed cottages, with tall thatched roofs and with great stone chimneys: a lonely little hamlet drowsing in the sun. White-winged ducks were quacking in the roadway, a

grey-coated donkey was grazing beside a hedge, and the threadlets of smoke, that mounted lazily above the roofs, rose up into a sky of the most exquisite purity, spacious, high, and cloudlessly blue. And again there was only one scene for them both.

"My God, that is where I was born!" groaned the man.

"That's my mother's cottage!" sobbed the woman, and wept aloud.

Then came rural scenes of almost every character, with a lad and a girl moving flittingly through them—laughing and kissing in the lanes among the brambles, drifting together everywhere, sweethearting through it all.

"Are you Nelly King, then?" asked the man, hoarsely.

"And you . . . you are Stephen Laity, are you not?"

"If we could both die here and now!" cried the man.

Then the pictures for a while grew blurred and confused, till presently they shewed the gas-lighted streets of London. . . .

"My God, I will see no more!" cried the girl. And she shudderingly held her hand before her eyes.

"Nor I, either!" cried the man, with an oath.

"However much you close your eyes," said the Showman, "you will cancel nothing of the pictures on the screen."

But they had turned and fled even while he was speaking.

"Even in the fair the pictures will pursue you!" said the stern-visaged Showman, following them with his eyes.

THE MAN WHO DESIRED TO BE A TREE.

THE sunshine streamed across the lush-grassed meadows, and beat fiercely down on the huge-limbed elms whose myriad leaves kept fluttering ceaselessly. In the dense green covert, formed by the multitude of interlacing branches, several wee brown songsters had built their nests, and they kept flitting to and fro and trilling joyously as the light breeze stirred the innumerable leaves.

The air was warm, and soft, and pleasant. The deep green arcades were cool and moist, full of the drowsy flutter that rippled through the branches, and full also of the deliciously delicate fragrance from the budding sprays and fresh green foliage. May was in the woodlands, shy and winsome; she had not yet shaken herself free from her day-dreams, and the wonder of her young hopes lingered about her still.

At the foot of a tree, reclining against its roots, lay a lean-visaged student, very shabbily dressed and with patches of thin grey hair around his temples. A volume of the *Faery Queen* lay open beside him, but he had for some time ceased to pore over its pages, being engaged instead in chasing Fancy as she flitted hither and thither through the vast green woodland, dallying with the shadows and gossiping with the wind.

His mind's eye revelled in the picturesque suggestions that seemed to him, as he lay here with half-closed lids, to be fleetingly visible, as if in a dream. He was aware of beautiful damsels in gauzy draperies pantingly hurrying through the dusky avenues with steel-clad knights in hot pursuit; of grey old monks, cowled and sandalled, moving hither and thither in a world of utter peace; and of dryads and fairies, fauns and satyrs, filling the woodland with dreamy poetry, as the wind filled its giant rafters with music, and the brooks purled babblingly through the crevices of its floor.

How delightful it would be to be a denizen of the forest—to be this elm in whose shadow he was lying! he thought.

The huge tent-like shadow of the elm-tree deepened and widened with the dropping sun, and the shadows of other trees in the vicinity—dainty saplings and gnarled old foresters—fell across the nearer margin of the grass-land in fantastic, almost semi-human outlines: at least, so it seemed to the dreamy student, as he lay here watching the breeze ripple across the grass-blades and listened to the murmur of the forest at his back.

"I should like to be a tree," he sighed lazily and half aloud.

"Would you?" asked a voice from somewhere close to him.

It was a low, caressing, insinuating voice, with a strange seductiveness in its silvery intonation. And instead of feeling startled he felt a sudden wave of happiness, as if a beautiful female had breathed upon his cheek.

"Would you?" asked the voice, deliciously flattering him, "*would* you like to be one of us indeed?"

A tree has a life void of trouble, he ruminated. The birds sing to it, and the wind caresses it, and it feels the sunshine, and greatens where it grows. Yes, I should like to be a tree indeed!

"Shall I grant your wish?" asked the voice whisperingly—how exquisitely sweet and soothing it was!—"shall I grant it here, and now?" it asked.

The student closed his eyes to leisurely consider; and then, half dreamily, answered, "Yes!"

To be a tree is to be in touch with Nature nakedly; to be stripped of the disguises that have gathered about the man, and to be thrown back blankly into the narrowest groove of life. The student felt the wind and the sun on his branches, and the birds sang joyously,

nestling among his leaves; his feet were rooted in the fresh and wholesome earth, and the sap moved sluggishly in his rough-barked trunk.

It was a calm and deeply drowsy existence; but the restlessness of humanity was not yet eliminated from him, and he investigated his novel tenement wonderingly, and not without a touch of squeamish disgust.

But when the quiet night descended on him, and the cooling dews slid into his pores, the exquisite soothe of the darkness enveloped him, and to the rustling of his leaves he fell healthily asleep.

He was awakened presently by the gracious dawn, by the sweet and wholesome breath of morning, and the flash of the sunrise and the singing of birds. And had it not been for the dew-crumpled volume that now lay blotched and smirched at his feet, he would have forgotten his manhood and the unquiet life of cities and would have looked for his brothers only among the trees.

But so long as the volume lay there forlornly, so long he remembered, and had something to regret.

But the days passed—he could now keep no count of them—and human speech and human passions dropped away from his memory as quietly and painlessly as his own ripe leaves began presently to drop. And the tree's life narrowed to its narrow round of needs.

It sheltered the birds, and it took the wind's kisses gladly, and it caught the snows in the wrinkles and twists of its boughs; and the squirrel nested in it, and the wood-mouse nibbled at it; and its life sufficed it, answering its desires.

One day there swept a mighty storm across the forest: the thunder crashed and the lightning flashed continuously; and the whole land held its breath, listening to the uproar.

The Lord of the Forest was moving among his children: and some of them he passed without injuring or despoiling them; but others he smote wrathfully, so that he rent them and they died.

And when he came to the tree that had one-time been the student, he remembered, and desired to bestow on it a boon.

And he said to the elm, now gnarled and wrinkled, "You shall be a man again, if you earnestly desire it—a man again until you die."

The tree heard the great wind roaring among its brethren, and it was aware of the wee birds cowering among its boughs; and it remembered, as in a flash, the weary life of humanity, with hopes to befool it and despair for its reward: and it rustled its myriad leaves whispering mournfully, "Let me, O Master, remain as I am!"

And the Lord of the Forest was content, and passed on.

THE MAN WHO HAD SEEN.

ON the third day he recovered from the "trance" and regained consciousness, and took up the burden of his life as before.

But the revelation which had been vouchsafed to him had influenced him profoundly. He had now a new estimate of values and results. The centre of his mental life was permanently shifted, and a new bias had been given to his thoughts.

He went to the King, where he sat sunning himself in his palace.

"You are very rich," said the man to the King.

"God has so willed it, and I am grateful," said the King.

"You hope one day to see God face to face?"

"I *do* hope so, fervently!" said the King, with unction.

"And if He questions you of your wealth you will express your gratitude and bow to Him, and God will accept the compliment and be content?"

The King was silent.

"You think He will ask no questions?" said the man. "He will not trouble to refer to His starving children, with whom you might reasonably have shared your superfluities; to the sick whom you might have succoured; or to the sorrowing whom you might have cheered? You had wealth, and were grateful for it: and you used it on yourself. And presently, when you are dead?" asked the man, more quietly. "If you sit beside the beggar who perished at your gates, what will you say to him if he should refer to matters such as these?"

"Sit beside a beggar!" cried the King, in high disdain.

"You forget it will be in heaven," said the man, gently.

"In heaven, of course, I shall be a king as I am here!"

"Oh, will you?" said the man: "I was not aware of that. I saw kings there performing the lowliest of services. And I saw many in hell: the majority of them were there." And therewith the man sighed heavily, as he mused.

The King turned his back on him: and they thrust him out at the gates.

The Archbishop was reading a novel by the fire.

"Your work, then, is ended, is it?" asked the man.

"Oh no! not by any means ended, I hope. I attended a drawing-room meeting at Lady Clack's yesterday," said the Archbishop, smiling benignantly on his questioner, "and this morning I have sanctioned proceedings against a vicar who for some time has been wavering heretically in his opinions. I think we can effectually silence him at last. Oh yes, I am extremely busy, I can assure you."

"There are no souls, then, to be saved?" said the man. "No lives to be reformed: and no mourners to be comforted? This side of your duties you have completed and closed?"

The Archbishop looked at him with extreme hauteur. "My dear sir, I leave these matters to my subordinates. I am here as an administrator, not as a minister."

"And you always choose the men best fitted to be ministers?"

"Of course. At any rate, I hope so," quoth the Archbishop.

"That young curate who has so successfully played the evangelist in Gorseshire—he will have one of your earliest nominations, then, no doubt?"

"Indeed, he will not! He has offended me deeply. Would you believe it? he wrote an article on me in one of the reviews, and he actually had the audacity, sir, to criticize me unfavourably! I will see that the man remains exactly where he is!"

"And when you by-and-by make your report to your Master, will you explain to Him your methods and your aims in this way? If so, do you think He will be satisfied with you? Your methods and His are at variance, surely? In heaven there are neither archbishops nor bishops, as such. If they pass the gates at all, it is merely as men who have done their duty. Do you think you will pass the gates on that score, your Grace?"

The Archbishop rang the bell sharply and abruptly.

"Please show this gentleman out!" said His Grace.

"So you persist in disowning your daughter?" asked the man, looking hard at the portly, pleasant-faced matron who was dandling her thirteenth infant on her knees. "You will show her no mercy, now she asks it at your hands?"

"She has disgraced me—I will never forgive her!" said the woman. "Let her starve with her brat. It will be well when they are dead."

"She has disgraced you, you say? But has she disgraced Nature? I thought it was Nature who was responsible for her sex and its instincts. She has obeyed the one and fulfilled the other. And they have been paramount considerations with you also, I perceive."

"Did she owe no duty, then, to her parents? Was I to count in her life merely as the soil to the plant?"

"In the scales of justice, as I saw them adjusted in heaven, the claim against the parents weighed the heaviest," said the man. "You suckled her at your breasts; but you brought her there to suckle. In your bringing her there, lies the onus of her claim."

"I tell you, she has disgraced me, and I will never forgive her!"

"'*Never*' is a long day for a mortal. You will be judged yourself before you reach the end of it," said the man.

"Three months' imprisonment with hard labour," said the magistrate.

"For taking a loaf of bread when he was starving!" cried the man.

"Even so," said the magistrate, with his hands on his paunch.

"But surely this is a monstrous perversion of justice. Or, rather, let me call it a monstrous *in*justice!"

"The laws of the community must be respected," said the magistrate.

"Here is a man—alive by no fault of his own, and poor, even to starvation, through absolute want of work: and yet you begrudge him the necessaries of life! If he tries to commit suicide, you pillory and chastise him, and if he tries to keep life in him out of the superfluities of others, you pass on him this monstrous sentence!" cried the man. "Surely here is some fault in the structure of your society."

"It is the law of the community!" said the magistrate, pompously.

"And in what way is the law of the community so very sacred, that it should be counted of higher price than the life and welfare of a man? The law of the community may be a very pretty idol to play before, but in heaven it counts for nothing," said the quiet old man.

"This man is a pestilent fellow," said the community. "He troubles us overmuch with this vision that he has knowledge of. Come, let us kill him!"

And they smote him, and he died.

THE UNCHRISTENED CHILD.

"*Thee* shaan't christen un, ef he's never christened!" said the father. "I've no faith in'ee: not a dinyun.[L] Go to Halifax to shoot gaanders: tha's all thee'rt fit for!"

"He'll suffer for it, both here and hereafter," said the parson.

"Doan't believe it!" said the man.

"Wherever he dies, whether on land or on water, he will become a creature of that element instead of going to his rest," said the parson, with an angry light in his eyes.

"Doan't believe it!" said the man: "an' thee doan't nayther."

The parson marched off, disdaining to reply.

The infant grew into a bright little lad, but there was always a certain oddity about him, and he saw and understood more than he ought.

One day he was out fishing with a companion, in a tiny punt they had borrowed for the purpose, when he leaned overboard too far and fell into the sea.

His little companion was so paralysed with terror that he could do nothing but set up a shrill screaming, clinging to the boat with both his hands.

Silas rose once—and twice—with wildly-pleading eyes: his mouth full of water: his hair plastered against his head: then sank; and a third time emerged just above the surface; so close to the boat that his companion, leaning over, could see him sinking down slowly into the crystalline depths, with his hands stretched up and the hair on his head tapering to a point like the flame of a candle.

"Silas! Silas!" the little lad shrieked.

But Silas sank down; and ever down: lower and lower beneath the translucent waters, the vast flood deepening its tint above him, till at last he was hopelessly buried out of sight.

When John Penberthy heard the terrible news he took the blow as a man might take a sentence of death—in grim silence, and with a sullen despair which nothing might henceforth banish or relieve. The roof-tree of his hopes was broken irretrievably, and he gazed down blankly at the ruin around his feet.

About three days after Silas was drowned, John was one afternoon out fishing for bait, and happened to be keeping rather close to the cliff-line, when he perceived a little seal emerge from a zawn[M] and come swimming, as with a settled purpose, towards the boat.

There was something so melancholy and so pathetically human in the soft, liquid eyes of the animal, that John felt his heart touched unaccountably.

Forgetting the line, which he was just about to draw in, he sat staring at the seal with a fixed intensity, as if he were looking in the familiar eyes of some one with whom he had a world of memories to interchange.

And, meanwhile, the seal swam straight up to him, till it was so close to the boat that he could touch it with his hand.

John leaned over and looked straight at the animal: fixing his eyes hungrily on the eyes of the seal.

"Why dedn'ee ha' me christened, faather?" asked the little seal, piteously.

"My God! are'ee Silas?" cried John, trembling violently.

"Iss, I'm Silas," said the little seal.

John stared aghast at the smooth brown head and the innocent eyes that watched him so pathetically.

"Why, I thought thee wert drownded, Silas!" he ejaculated.

"I caan't go to rest 'tell I'm christened," said the seal.

"How can us do it now?" asked the father, anxiously.

"Ef anywan who's christened wed change sauls weth me," said the seal, "then I cud go to rest right away."

"Thee shall ha' *my* saul, Silas," said the father, tenderly.

"Wil'ee put thy mouth to mine an' braythe it into me, faather?"

"Iss, me dear, that I will!" said the father. "Rest thee shust have ef I can give it to'ee, Silas. Put thy haands or paws around me neck, wil'ee, soas?"

And John leaned over the side of the boat till his face touched that of the piteous little seal.

At that moment the boat—which for the last few minutes had been allowed to drift at the mercy of the tide, owing to John's pre-occupation—was caught among the irregular currents near a skerry, and John was suddenly jerked, or tilted, overboard, plunging into the waters with a sullen splash.

When he rose to the surface, with a deadly chill in him—the chill of his drear and imminent doom, even more than the grueing chill of the water—his first thought, even in that perilous moment, was of dear little Silas and the promise he had given to him, or, at least, the promise he had given to the seal.

The quaint little creature was, however, nowhere visible; and John, with a sudden influx of strength—an alarmed awakening and

resurgence of his will—made up his mind to save his life if it were possible, and quietly leave the settlement of the other affair to God.

But grey old Fate was stronger than he was. And the waves were here her obedient servants; doing her will blindly, without pity or remorse.

In a little while John was tossing among the seaweed—into a bed of which his body had descended—and what further dreams (if any) he dreamed there beneath the waters, must remain untold till the Judgment Day.

FOOTNOTES:

[L] Little bit.

[M] A cave.

THE MAN WHO MET HATE.

IT was drawing on towards midnight, and the world seemed very lonely.

There was a huge, round harvest moon in the sky, and the hills were bathed in a kind of spectral splendour—a faint and filmy shimmer of silver that left the outlines of objects blurred and elusive, though the scene as a whole emerged clearly for the eye. The wind was sighing drowsily across the moors, while high on the rugged cairns on the hill-tops it was wuthering mournfully beneath the wan grey sky.

And 'Lijah, staring sleeplessly through his blindless bedroom-window, felt a growing unrest in the very marrow of his bones.

He could see down below, in the little lonesome cove, the cottage where Dorcas had now made her nest with that "darned gayte long-legged 'Miah" for her husband, and in the sudden heat and bitterness of his wrath his heart became like a live coal within him. "I'll have my revenge on un, ef I haang for it!" growled he.

And then he remembered that up on yonder moors—whose ferns and granite boulders he could see plainly in the moonlight—there was a "gashly owld fogou,"[N] where, if a man went at midnight prepared to boldly summon Hate and to "turn a stone"[O] in her honour, his hatred would be accomplished for him "as sure as death."

"An' I'll go there, ef I die for it!" said he grimly to himself.

The village was asleep, and all its cottages were smokeless. There was no one stirring anywhere in the cove. But far out in the moonlit bay he could see the fishing-boats dotting the vast grey plain, and he knew that in one of them 'Miah Laity was fishing, and was no doubt thinking of Dorcas as he fished.

"I'll spoil 'es thinkin' for un 'fore long," said 'Lijah, "ayven ef I have to sill me saul to do the job!"

And with that he slipped on his coat and boots—for he had been standing at the window half undressed—and clapping on his cap as he passed through the kitchen, strode heavily and gloomily out of the house.

On the moor he had only the breeze for company, and its long, vague wail, as it rustled across the ferns, merely deepened the moody irritation in his mind. He felt as sour as a fanatic and as gloomy as a thief.

To find the fogou, among the bewildering growth of ferns, was by no means the easiest task in the world: for the rude cave-dwelling was literally buried in the hill-side; its entrance being hidden by the rank vegetation that here reached almost to Elijah's arm-pits.

As he ploughed his way through the trackless tangle, giving vent the while to a superfluity of oaths, he presently stumbled on the entrance to the fogou, almost precipitating himself into its darkness, so suddenly had he stumbled on it, wading through the ferns.

The low and narrow tunnel in the hill-side, with its walls and roof lined with slabs of rock, was as uncanny a spot as a man could set foot in, and Elijah shook like one with the ague, as he thrust aside the ferns and peered into the blackness.

He turned round, half inclined to retreat; but, as he turned, his eyes chanced to travel to the sea, where he could still discern the fishing-boats riding at their nets; and the idea of 'Miah out there thinking of Dorcas made him clench his teeth grimly, as if he had received a blow.

He swung round on his heels sharply and determinedly, savagely trampling the ferns beneath his feet, and strode forward into the pitch-black mirk.

Groping his way in, with hands extended, he presently found the block of granite called the altar, and "turning the stone" in the hollow on its surface, he shaped the while in his heart his rancorous prayer to Hate.

Suddenly he was aware of a face staring at him: a mere face vaguely limned on the darkness, as if a bodiless head were held before him by the hair.

And in that same instant, without a word being uttered, he felt that he had looked in the face of Hate.

He reeled out of the fogou like a drunken man.

The vision was one it would be impossible to forget. He must bear with him this memory, as a man who has committed a murder must bear with him the memory of his victim's ghastly face.

"I'll wait an' see what comes of it," said 'Lijah to himself, as he ran and stumbled down the hill-side in the moonlight, the thick hair stiffening under his cap.

The months slipped by, and the years dragged on sluggishly, and 'Miah and Dorcas were as happy as ever. They had a couple of bairns to toddle about their cottage, and 'Miah had been fairly fortunate on the fishery, so that their lives were generally sunny and enviable to an extent that made Elijah's blood turn to gall.

"Thee'st forgotten me, thou darned owld liar that thou art!" said he, shaking his fist savagely at the fern-clad hill-side, where Hate presumably was watching from her lair.

On which he heard a chilling whisper at his elbow: "You shall have your wish, as sure as death!"

Elijah heard the loud thump, thump of his heart. But an instant after, his pulse danced buoyantly, and he went about his work chuckling grimly to himself.

But while 'Miah's life was harvesting happiness, as his nets gathered abundantly the harvest of the sea, Elijah's life on his farm on the hill-side appeared to be stifling among the stones and thistles, and a sour and acid leanness seemed eating up his heart.

It was as if Hate had shot her arrows blindly, and they had struck and rankled in the wrong breast.

With Elijah Trevorrow nothing seemed to prosper. He might rise early and go to bed late, he might pinch and pare as relentlessly as he pleased, every year of his life he grew leaner and poorer, till the scowl on his features deepened permanently among its lines, and in the end transformed his features as completely as a mask.

He was no more like the clear-eyed, whistling young farmer who had gone a-wooing Dorcas among the rustling wheat-fields, than the wrinkled tree, with its heart rotted out of it, is like the green young sapling in the bravery of its spring.

Ever watching hungrily to see Misfortune seize his rival and set her teeth thirstily in the very pulse of his life, Elijah held aloof from commerce with his neighbours, sour and discontented, and wishing each day to end, in the hope that on the morrow he might see the evil he desired.

Presently there went a whisper through the tiny hamlet that Elijah Trevorrow was a bit touched *here*—the villagers tapping their brows significantly as they spoke.

"He do talk as ef Hate es a woman, an' he've seed her. Up in that owld fogou he've mit her, he do say. An' he's all'ys sayin' she ha'nt keeped her word to un. Whatever do 'a mayne, weth 'es gashly owld tales?"

'Miah, whose name had got mixed up in the tale, one day called at the lonely farmhouse, in order to see Elijah and reason with him if he could.

But Elijah, as 'Miah approached, set the dogs on him savagely, and the fisherman was obliged precipitately to beat a retreat.

At last, one day in the depth of winter, when the hills were white with whirling snowdrifts, Elijah Trevorrow disappeared.

They searched everywhere for him, but could find no trace of him, and the search was finally abandoned in despair.

Elijah had made his way to the fogou, determined to front Hate and to compel her to keep faith with him, even if he squeezed her life out through her throat.

Some eight months after—in the time of blackberries—some youngsters, questing among the ferns on the hillside, stumbled across the fogou and crept in to explore it.

They rushed down the hillside screaming with terror; and, when safe among the cottages, began to babble incoherently that there was a ghost up yonder in the "owld hunted fogou," they had seen its face—and it was white—so white!

The villagers began to have an inkling of the truth, and went toiling up through the ferns in a body.

"As like as not 'tes *he*, poor saul," they whispered awesomely as they clambered up the windy ridges of the hill.

True enough, it was Elijah, dead in the fogou. But whether or not he had again met Hate there, is one of the questions the gossips have still to solve.

FOOTNOTES:

[N] A subterranean storehouse or place of shelter.

[O] A portion of the rites practised in connection with "cursing stones."

THE HAUNTED HOUSE.

IT was only an old deserted house, perched half-way up the hillside and overlooking the village. But it was none the less the village theatre: the peep-hole through which the villagers obtained a glimpse of many mysteries, and the stage and drop-scene of half the legends of the thorp.

It was an old stone building which evidently had once been a dwelling of importance, but for quite a century it had been tenantless and almost entirely dismantled: the home of the owl and the lizard, of the spectre and the bat.

When the sunrise splashed across the fragmentary panes of glass that here and there remained in their frames, the farmer would stand still at his ploughing on the hill-slope and glance up at the great Argus-eyed building—that had now, however, more sockets than eyes—and a world of memories, of legends and superstitions, would buzz, with strange bewilderment, through his brain.

The old house reminded him of his mother and of his grandfather, and of those who had been the village historians for his childhood, and a musing gravity seemed to deepen in his mind. He was aware of the brevity of life, and of the lapse of the personality; of the tragedies of passion, with their gravity and poignancy, and of the mystery that broods at the back of all our thoughts. But most of all he was aware that the building standing fronting him was the very kernel of his individuality projected into visibility: the one knot into which all his memories were tied.

He would hold his children spell-bound by the hour as he told them the ordinary folk-tales of the hamlet, with that ruin on the hillside as the stage for the majority of them; till his daughter Ruth, who was young and sentimental, though with a streak of passion running through her nature, learned to contemplate the ruin with an awe akin to his, and stared up wonderingly at it, so

long and so often, that at last it had become for her a necessary part of life.

While Ruth was still a child, the haunted ruin chiefly attracted her thoughts as the scene and locality of uncanny occurrences that were fanciful and unusual rather than sombre or suggestive. It was the great haunted cheese in which the piskies burrowed, and out of which they hopped with amusing unexpectedness: it was the building to pass which you must always turn your stocking, if you wished to escape being *pisky-ledden*, or misguided: it was the place to which the "Little Folks"[P] conveyed stolen children: above all, it was the place of dark and cobwebbed corners, where naughty children were put to live with snails and spiders and with great big goggle-eyed buccaboos!

As she stood on her doorstep with her bit of knitting in her hand—a tiny doll's stocking, or a garter for herself—little Ruth would stare up at the great black building, with the scarlet splendour of the sunset at its back, until she almost fancied she could see the little winking piskies grinning through the window-holes and clambering across the roofs.

And by-and-by, when the rich yellow sky began to darken and the flocks of rooks flew cawing overhead, Ruth would shiver with a delicious sense of security as she stood beneath the porch in the gathering twilight and heard the wind begin to moan and sigh mysteriously, as if it trembled at the thought of spending the night on the hillside with no other company than that "whisht[Q] owld house."

As she grew older and became aware of the drift of her wishes, feeling stirrings and promptings at the roots of her life, her imagination seized now on the passionate human tragedies which, according to the legends, had been enacted in the building. She had a sweetheart of her own, and she could understand lovers; and something of the glamour and mystery of a great heady passion she believed she could interpret out of her own ripened life.

But Rastus Dabb, her sweetheart, was as cloddish and unimaginative as the heavy-uddered cows, with their great fleshy dewlaps, of which he was prouder than he was of anything else in his world. It was quite impossible to get his feet off the solid earth: and apparently his mind was anchored firmly to his feet. But Ruth had the attractiveness of all young things—she was fresh and cheerful, with a heart as light as a feather—and, by the law of contrast, she suited him to a nicety, more especially as she was an excellent little housewife to boot. So the courting prospered sunnily; and he let her "romance" as she pleased.

When she was a wife and mother, Ruth presently became acquainted with that grim Shadow who knows the secret of our tears—their source and the bitter in them—and knows, too, the secret of everlasting peace. And thereafter, when at intervals his wings darkened the world for her, her thoughts went out, with a strange yearning, towards the dead who had once inhabited the ruin and could now roam through it only as ghosts.

"Shall I one day have only such a foothold as theirs in this dear green world of ours?" she would ask herself, shiveringly. And the Sunday-evening's sermon could soothe her not a whit.

At last, in the waning afternoon of life, when her smooth brown hair was as yet unstreaked with grey and her cheeks had still a splash of colour in them, she fell ill of some mysterious malady—mysterious, at least, to the sympathetic villagers—and one dreary day in the blustering autumn she was aware in her heart that the Shadow was in the room.

"Draw back the curtains as far as you can," said she to Rastus, who stood helpless by the bedside.

And when they were drawn, and she could see the great gaunt ruin frowning blackly above the slopes of the shadow-checkered hillside, she cried out suddenly, "I'm going there among them, Rastus! Oh, dear, hold me!" And with that she passed.

FOOTNOTES:

[P] Fairies.

[Q] Melancholy, forlorn.

GIFTS AND AWARDS.

"TWO bonnier babes," said the grey old midwife, bending thoughtfully over them, "I never before assisted into the world."

The mother, lying wan in her bed, smiled happily.

"So bonny are they," said the wrinkled beldame, "that I will give to each of them one of my choicest gifts: something they will still keep hugged to their hearts when they are as close to the gates as you or I."

"And how close is that?" asked the mother, growing whiter.

The wise old midwife turned from the bedside and bent above the infants, mumbling to herself.

Presently the mother started up from a doze. There was no one in the room but her married sister. "I dreamed Death was in the room with me just now," said she. "And he had an old woman with him whom he called his Sister. She seemed to me to be giving my babies something: but what it was I don't know. At first I thought it was a plaything; but now I think it was a sorrow. At least. . . ."

"*Dear!* DEAR!" cried her sister, in alarm, as if she saw the spirit drifting beyond her ken.

"My babies!" whispered the mother.

And presently she was "at rest."

Rick and Dick grew up somehow. Though motherless and fatherless they were not quite friendless, and in the struggle for existence they held their own and kept alive.

A more agreeable and cheerful fellow than Dick it would have been impossible to find, according to his companions. He seemed dowered with a disposition so equable and contented that it was a pleasure to be with him: and he radiated cheerfulness like a fire. Moreover, he was in thorough harmony with his surroundings. He found fault with nothing in the structure of society, and desired no change either in laws or institutions: everything was ordered wisely, and was ordered for the best. In fact, he was the spirit of Content personified: and much patting on the back did he get for his reward.

"We must give him a helping hand, must push him forward, you know," said the Community, beaming on its cheerful young champion.

And Dick took the "pushing forward" with admirable self-composure, and certainly seemed to deserve all he got.

As for Rick, the Community would have nothing to do with him. He was not quite an out-and-out pessimist, it was true; but he seemed to look on the Community as a most clumsily-articulated creature—a thing of shreds and patches, and the Cheap Jack of shams. He was always putting his finger on this spot or that; hinting that here there was a weakness, and there . . . something worse. Every advanced thinker, and the majority of theorists, could count on finding a sympathetic listener in him: and not infrequently they found in him an advocate also; such an arrant anti-optimist was the pestilent fellow. As if Civilization, after thousands of years of travail, had produced nothing better than a clumsy abortion with the claws of an animal and the tastes of Jack-an-ape! Why, the man must be mad, to have such irregular fancies! It was a pity laws against opinions were not oftener put in force: then—a click of the guillotine, and the world would have peace!

Rick listened grimly, and made a note of the imagery. "You will remember it better in black and white," said he.

In the course of years Dick became a churchwarden and a philanthropist (he took the infection very mildly and in its most agreeable form), and a highly respected gambler on, or rather member of, the Stock Exchange. He was also joined "in the bands of holy matrimony" to a buxom young widow who was left-handedly connected with The Aristocracy Itself! The lady brought him a most desirable fortune to start with, and after some years made him a present of twins: so that Dick was now a notable man among his acquaintances, and had the ambition to become a bigger man still, by-and-by: a Common Councilman certainly, and an Alderman *perhaps!*

Meanwhile Rick had developed into a musty *savant:* a fellow whose tastes, if you might call them such, were of the most *outré* order—in advance of everything that was sober, respectable, and conventional; and in aggressive alliance with everything that was disturbing, and that was maliciously and wickedly critical (said the saints).

"The kernel of his life is unhealthy," said his brother: "it has a deadly fungus growing in it, I am afraid."

"The fungus of discontent, dear friend," said the clergyman.

"I am afraid so," said Dick, with a prodigious great sigh. "Still, we must none the less pray for him unceasingly: for prayer availeth much, as we know."

The clergyman dramatically clasped his white hands together, looking up as one who speechlessly admires.

Rick sat musing in his gloomy study: thinking of the ladder he had climbed, and of the scenery of his life that now stretched out like a map before him.

Presently the study door opened softly, and a Figure came in and took a chair at his side.

"You have come, then!" said Rick. "I thought your coming must be near."

"Shall we start?" asked the Figure.

"I am ready," answered Rick.

And they passed out together into the deep black night.

"Come, take my arm: we will call together for your brother."

"He has so much to make him happy! There are the little ones and his wife! Could you not delay a little?"

"He must come with us to-night."

Dick was attending a banquet which was being given in his honour to celebrate his recent election as a Common Councilman, and the lust of life was in his every vein. But in the act of responding to the toast of the evening he was suddenly attacked by a fit of apoplexy. He staggered, and fell back—and they perceived that he was dead.

It was a bleak and a very depressing journey to pass nakedly and alone from the warm, well-lighted, and flattering banquet, and, most of all, from the comfortable and familiar earth, up to the Doom's-man and the Bar beside the Gates. If he could only have had a friend or two at his side!

On the way up, just as he was nearing the gates, Dick overtook Rick, who was a little way ahead of him.

"Come, let us go up together," said Rick.

At the gates, however, Dick began to grow uneasy. His brother's reputation on earth among "the godly" was a curiously unwelcome memory to Dick now the Bar was so near and the Doom's-man was in sight.

"You go first," said Dick to his brother; falling behind as if to dissociate himself from him.

Rick passed the gate and stood silently at the Bar.

"Place the brothers side by side," said the Doom's-man sternly.

"If you please," began Dick, stumbling in his speech, so afraid was he of being confounded in the judgment of his brother; "If you please. . . ."

Said the Doom's-man: "Let the Advocates state the case."

The Black-robed Advocate claimed Rick boldly. The verdict of Rick's fellow-citizens, he asserted, was emphatic on the point that Rick was legitimately his. And he went with the majority, and claimed a verdict accordingly.

The White-robed Advocate advanced, more hesitatingly, that Dick presumably should go with *him*. The Community, he averred, had long ago decided that only in this way would justice have its due.

The Doom's-man's verdict was simplicity itself.

A nature so contented, and so little given to fault-finding, would be the typical one for the Black Advocate's household, said the Doom's-man, humorously contemplating Dick. "Take him away with you," said he to the Black Advocate: "the man will give you no trouble, *as you know*.

"But that restless, fault-finding fellow there," and he indicated Rick with a movement of his forefinger, "it would need a faultless abode

like *yours* to satisfy him," and he signed to the silent White Advocate at his side. "Take him, he is yours," said the Doom's-man solemnly.

And with that the Advocates departed with their awards.

FRIEND OR FOE?

I.

SIR EDWARD lay back lazily in his chair, with a letter in a woman's handwriting crumpled at his feet.

"She must make the best of it now," said he, gazing at the fire. "She is not worse off than others, come to that." And he lolled among the cushions, gazing into the fire, with a hard and cruel look on his countenance, on which the stamp of sensuality was unmistakably impressed.

It was a large and luxuriously-furnished apartment, with everything so arranged as to minister to the senses and afford them the fullest gratification which suggestions could impart.

But Sir Edward, lolling by the fire this evening, experienced little satisfaction in his luxurious surroundings: the eroding tooth of thought they could no way quiet; and it was the irritation of this that he most desired to have allayed.

He lighted a cigar, and began to smoke vigorously, leaning back the while and contemplating the smoke-clouds that drifted round in swirling folds and spirals, an occasional ring mounting airily over all.

Smoking away steadily, cigar after cigar—for he was an insatiable smoker as he was insatiable in everything—Sir Edward seemed presently to be almost hidden among the smoke-wreaths, which had now thickened in the room with unexampled rapidity.

At first he felt inclined to ring for a servant and have the windows opened to let in a breath of air, but there was a certain amount of interest in watching the floating veils of smoke; and, besides, in the mere act of idly watching these he could let certain vivid tableaux, with which Memory was amusing him, drift beyond the range of his attention, he hoped. So he lay back, letting the smoke thicken in the

atmosphere, while he followed the fantastic wreaths lazily with his eyes.

It was almost as if he were dozing as he lay there; for he could have sworn that in the chair on the opposite side of the fireplace he perceived a grey old fogey reclining among the cushions, yet with deep-sunken eyes fixed watchfully on his face.

It was really absurd to have an utter stranger intrude his company on him in this unceremonious manner, and Sir Edward felt inclined to question him sharply, and, if need be, have him turned out neck and crop.

But instead of taking up the intended *rôle* of inquisitor, he found himself reduced ignominiously to the *rôle* of the questioned one.

"Where were you thinking of going to-night?" asked the Visitor. "To the theatre, or the opera, or to that 'private club' we know of?" And the Visitor looked at him with a glance of quiet intelligence which Sir Edward somehow felt powerless to resent.

"I was thinking. . . ."

"Of going with me? Quite right!" replied the Visitor. "With me you shall go: unless we can come to terms together. In which case, possibly, I may leave you behind *for a time*."

Sir Edward ceased to smoke: and his hands trembled on his knees.

But he made no movement, and uttered no protest. Before the glance of his visitor he quailed and was dumb.

"Ruth Medwin, I presume, must bear her disgrace as best she can? You will neither recognize her, nor make her an allowance, I understand."

"I think I have changed my mind. . . ."

"Too late," said the Visitor. "After having seen *me* you can change your mind no more."

Sir Edward lay motionless among the cushions of his chair.

"I should like . . . if you will allow me. . . ." he began feebly.

"I can allow you only one choice: and that a peremptory one. Will you go with me instantly—I think you know me—or shall I call for you again *on any terms I care to fix?*"

"Will your terms be as pitiless. . . ."

"You shall hear them, if you please."

Sir Edward sank deeper among the soft cushions: his whole life concentrated in the watchful stare with which he fixed his eyes on his visitor's face.

"Shall I take you with me now to undergo your punishment—and, I need scarcely tell you, it will not be a light one—or would you prefer a delay before you accompany me: a period of expiation, in some form I may decide on, with a hope of a reduction in your punishment at the end?"

"A delay—a period of expiation, for God's sake!"

"You are certain you prefer it?"

"I implore it! I entreat it! For God's sake, grant me a respite!"

"Be it so."

II.

The soul that had been Sir Edward's sickened with disgust.

It was located in the body of a miserable cab-horse; one of the sorriest hacks in the East End of London, and practically fit only for the knacker, one would have said.

It was a life the human soul found inexpressibly hateful. If this were expiation, it was in a purgatory indeed. But in a purgatory of filth and of disgusting sensations, instead of in a torturing purgatory of fire.

To be lashed with the whip, and galled excruciatingly with the harness; to have the bit between the teeth, or tugging at the jaws unmercifully; and to have the blinkers ever blotting out the vision of the world: to strain every sinew, and have the service accepted thanklessly; to be tortured with discomfort, and to work absolutely without reward—it was a life devoid of even the meanest compensations: loathsome, and in every way abhorrent to thought.

The horses, and other animals he met in the streets, he might have communicated with in some way or other, but his driver—a drunken, quarrelsome fellow—was always tugging at the bit or brandishing the whip; and if the poor animal even tried to turn his head, he was belaboured as brutally as if he had swerved or fallen asleep.

There was no chance even of rubbing noses at the drinking-troughs, or of laying his head on the neck of a companion at the stand. And whatever might be taking place in the streets through which he was passing, he was debarred from bestowing on it even the most casual attention.

His mental activity was ignored, or trampled on, with an indifference that was never once relaxed or relieved.

His life was a horror unexampled in its profundity. The cruel debasement and defilement of it penetrated so deeply that he repented bitterly of the choice into which he had been betrayed. He would infinitely have preferred suffering among his equals in hell.

A year of this life was as much as he could endure. One day he stumbled across a tram-line, and, falling, broke his leg—hopelessly snapping the tendon, and otherwise injuring himself—and he was carted off to the knackers to receive his *coup de grâce*.

A moment or two before he was killed, the eyes of the animal lighted up with a strangely human expression—which was succeeded by a look of the most unappeasable despair.

Evidently he had again seen the grey old man.

But the Visitor's communication to him remained unrevealed, and it was probably torturing him still when he . . . died?

THE FIELDS OF AMARANTH.

"I SHALL seek the fields of amaranth," said the young man defiantly. "And I shall find them," added he, turning tenderly to his mother. "And when I have found them I will comeback for *you*, dear mother, and I will take you with me that we may dwell there in peace."

"What do you know of peace, and why should you desire it?" asked the father, with a certain cold contempt in his tone. "You have not yet lived; and you have certainly not laboured. Rest is for those who have laboured and grown weary. In that rest that you desire you would have an empty mind for showman, and of its meagre entertainment you would tire as speedily as a child. Live first, and watch the puppets of memory play afterwards. The fields of amaranth will wait for you however long you live."

But the young man insisted: "I want to find them *now*. And when I have found them I will come for *you*, mother, dear; and we will return to them together and be happy and at peace."

But the mother's eyes were troubled with an inexplicable expression. "It were better that you should wait till I come to *you*," she answered gently. "As come to you I surely shall—one day. But come not to fetch me . . . if once you find the fields."

"I surely *shall* come for you," cried the youth.

"No, no!" implored the mother.

But he smiled on her, and was gone.

It was a long journey, and a toilsome one, and the end of it the youth could neither learn of nor anticipate.

The fields of amaranth? Yes: all had heard of them. But no one knew any one who had ever found them. And, for themselves, they were

content to know these waited for them somewhere. They had ties—they had businesses—they were content to live and wait.

"When I return from them, shall I give you tidings of them?" asked the young man, earnestly.

"No, no!" They were vehement in their dissuasions that he should not: finally even fleeing from him in terror at the thought.

And the young man mused perplexedly as he walked on. "Are there *really* fields of amaranth for those who can find them?" he asked of a wrinkled, white-haired wayfarer. "Or is it merely a bait, a delusion, and a lie?"

"Yes, surely, my son, these fields await us all: else life, at best, were a sorry game for most of us. It is there we shall rest and reap our reward."

"But no one seems eager to set out for them and discover them."

"No one?" quoth the old man, looking at him strangely: "there are many ways of getting there: you have chosen only one. There are other roads, and crowded ones: though you know nothing of them yet."

The young man brushed past him hot with disdain. He was merely an old dotard: empty-minded like the rest.

The lures of the highway were many and formidable; but the young man turned aside from them impatiently. "I am bound for the fields of amaranth," cried he haughtily: "when I return I will taste these good things you offer."

"Will he ever return?" whispered a girl to her mother.

She had looked with eyes of love on the daring young wayfarer; and a vague regret shivered through her as he passed on.

"God only knows. But I doubt it," said the mother.

The girl hid her face in her apron and wept.

But the young man had not overheard the whisper, and with head held high he pushed on along the road.

And here were the fields of amaranth at last! He could see them smiling faintly on the other side of the valley. But they had a strangely vague and unsubstantial look. One might almost have fancied he were looking at a mirage.

And between the young wayfarer and the fields of amaranth the rugged hillside sloped abruptly: its foot being shrouded in a dense white mist. He could hear a river murmuring sullenly somewhere in the depths, but the mist hid the waters and he could only hear their moan.

How far he had left the busy highway behind him! He would like to take just one farewell glance at it. The fields beyond him seemed to waver deceptively in his eyes. One glance at the highway, with its booths and its faces, and his vigour, strangely waning, would surely be renewed.

But as he turned and saw the dear familiar highway, along which he had trudged so many weary miles, his heart went out in a yearning towards it, and he stretched out his arms to it, hungering for its life.

So mighty was the fascination it now exercised over him, that he began to rush headlong down the hill towards it, eager to be once more mingling in its throng, and to once more feel its hum in his ears.

At the foot of the hill he met the fair young girl whose eyes had erstwhile followed him so wistfully, and he flung himself into her arms sobbing violently.

"The life here—you—I cannot part with them!" he cried passionately. And he shuddered: "If the wish had come too late!"

THE COMEDY OF A SOUL.

"YOU are quite sure you will never change? will never desert me, or be untrue to me?"

"I am absolutely sure of it, my darling!" he answered resolutely. "Any pledge my sweet one desires I will give her freely," added he, as he again kissed her passionately on the mouth.

"Would you leave me your soul in pawn?" asked the maiden, smiling at him bewitchingly with her deliciously red lips; her cheeks dimpling and her brown eyes sparkling, and her heaving breasts but thinly hidden from his gaze.

"Willingly! And be glad to leave it in my darling's custody!" And his lips hovered caressingly around her just-disclosed shoulder.

"Very well, I will accept the pledge," said she.

He was beginning again to kiss her fondlingly.

"You are a man of honour, are you not?" asked she; showing her even white teeth, and dimpling her rose-leaf cheeks temptingly.

"Certainly. I hope so."

"Then let me have your soul."

"But that would mean death for me! Do you desire me to die, my love?" And a look of questioning wonder crept into his eyes.

"By no means! I have not been reared by a philosopher for nothing. This crystal ball"—and she held out to him a tiny globe of crystal—"put your lips to it and pawn your soul to its keeping. I will warrant you, it will hold it as safely as I could."

He glanced at the tiny globe distrustfully.

"Are you afraid? Do you wish to withdraw from your word?"

"By no means."

"Then breathe against it, my love." And she held the crystal ball temptingly towards him. "You can imagine it is my lips you are touching," added she, with a light, coquettish laugh, leaning provocatively close to him.

He took the crystal reluctantly, and breathed against it as she wished.

"Oh!" cried he suddenly, drawing back his lips.

She took the crystal globe from him and peered into it anxiously. Then cried, in a tone of triumph, "Look! there it is."

He was aware of something cloudy—vague and light as smoke—floating, as it were, in the core of the crystal. And suddenly he felt a sense of want within himself.

She put the crystal in her bosom, and let it lie between her breasts.

"It is warm and pleasant there: you will never let it grow cold, will you?"

"Never!" And she laughed; dimpling rosily in her mirth. "Now you can set off on your journey," said the maiden.

"I have no wish now to leave your side," he whispered meekly.

"This rose, that I have been wearing, you were wishing for just now. See! I toss it yonder! Fetch and keep it!" cried the maiden.

He ran after it; groping for it where it had fallen in the grass.

"Cuckoo! cuckoo!" sounded all around him. It was as if the wood had suddenly grown vocal with cuckoos.

He turned his head quickly. The maiden had disappeared.

"Why did I trust my soul to her keeping?" he wailed drearily. "If she should lose it; or mislay it; or should even let it grow cold! My love! my love! my love!" he began calling.

"Cuckoo! cuckoo!" kept sounding across the grass.

He ran hither and hither: he followed the woodland paths feverishly.

At times he fancied he caught a glimpse of her vanishing garments; of the sunlight glinting on her long gold tresses. Now he imagined he could hear her laughter echoing among the tree-trunks: and anon he even fancied he could hear her singing. But he pursued her down the long green vistas in vain.

He sat down beneath a tree and clasped his hands drearily. "What a fool I was to trust my soul to her!" he wailed.

And at that moment he was aware of a ragged pedlar coming along the forest glades, and whistling as he came.

"Ho! young man! you look melancholy," quoth the pedlar. "What d'ye lack? A philtre to make your sweetheart love you? Ribbons for a lady? A collar for your hound?"

"I want a soul," said the young man, glancing at him hungrily.

"A common want!" quoth the pedlar, grinning broadly. "But here in my pack I have souls in plenty. Dip in your hand and take one boldly!"

"I should like to choose. . . ."

"It is take it, or leave it. I allow no choice. I am offering you a gift."

The pedlar laid his half-open pack on the grass.

"Dip in your hand and take one, if you will."

The young man dipped in his hand at a venture, and drew out one—the soul of an ape.

"Not that! I will not have that!" cried he.

"Then you will have none," said the pedlar, dropping the soul in his pack again. "If the great Soul Maker, who manufactures them by the million, allows neither picking nor choosing, beyond the casual dip of chance, do you think that a mere pedlar in souls, like myself, can do business on a basis which *he* has found unprofitable? Pooh, man, get back your soul *if you can*, or else you may do without one, as far as I am concerned." And off strolled the pedlar, whistling as he went.

The young man leaned his head dejectedly on his hand.

"How can I get back my soul?" he moaned.

"Why not live without one?" croaked a voice above his shoulder.

He looked up, and saw a sooty old raven peering down at him.

"Live without a soul! You'll never miss it," croaked the raven.

"Can I?" cried the young man: amazed, yet hopeful.

"*Can I?*" croaked the raven, mockingly echoing him. "*Can I?* Of course you can, young fool!"

"Then I will!" exclaimed the young man, starting to his feet.

"That's right," croaked the raven. "You're the right sort—*you* are!"

"A capital idea that!" quoth the young man, cheerfully.

He looked up, but the raven had hopped away among the branches.

"Well, at any rate, his hint was well meant, and I'll follow it!" quoth the young man, striding out boldly towards the houses which he could just see glimmering beyond the edge of the wood.

"Ugh! How ugly and dirty it has become!" quoth the maiden, gazing in the crystal at the soul which she had coveted and stolen. "I will throw it away, it no longer amuses me!"

And she threw it from her into the mire of the city: and the wheels and the feet rapidly buried it in the mud.

The grey-haired Bishop looked "so beautiful" in his coffin, that the deaconesses and the dear good sisters longed to kiss him.

"None of 'em ever found out that you wanted a soul," croaked the raven, who sat perched on the window-sill, blinking in the sunshine.

But there was no response to this: for how can a dead man talk?

THE END.