

The Paradise of Choice

By Quiller-Couch

It was not as in certain toy houses that foretell the weather by means of a man-doll and a woman-doll—the man going in as the woman comes out, and *vice versa*. In this case both man and woman stepped out, the man half a minute behind; so that the woman was almost at the street-corner while he hesitated just outside the door, blinking up at the sky, and then dropping his gaze along the pavement.

The sky was flattened by a fog that shut down on the roofs and chimneys like a tent-cloth, white and opaque. Now and then a yellowish wave rolled across it from eastward, and the cloth would be shaken. When this happened, the street was always filled with gloom, and the receding figure of the woman lost in it for a while.

The man thrust a hand into his trousers pocket, pulled out a penny, and after considering for a couple of seconds, spun it carelessly. It fell in his palm, tail up; and he regarded it as a sailor might a compass. The trident in Britannia's hand pointed westward, down the street.

"West it is," he decided with a shrug, implying that all the four quarters were equally to his mind. He was pocketing the coin, when footsteps approached, and he lifted his head. It was the woman returning. She halted close to him with an undecided manner, and the pair eyed each other.

We may know them as Adam and Eve, for both were beginning a world that contained neither friends nor kin. Both had very white hands and very short hair. The man was tall and meagre, with a receding forehead and a sandy complexion that should have been freckled, but was not. He had a trick of half-closing his eyes when he looked at anything, not screwing them up as seamen do, but appearing rather to drop a film over them like the inner eyelid of a bird. The woman's eyes resembled a hare's, being brown and big, and set far back, so that she seemed at times to be looking right behind her. She wore a faded look, from her dust-coloured hair to her boots, which wanted blacking.

"It all seems so wide," she began; "so wide—"

"I'm going west," said the man, and started at a slow walk. Eve followed, a pace behind his heels, treading almost in his tracks. He went on, taking no notice of her.

"How long were you in there?" she asked, after a while.

"Ten year'." Adam spoke without looking back. "'Cumulated jobs, you know.'"

"I was only two. Blankets it was with me. They recommended me to mercy."

"You got it," Adam commented, with his eyes fastened ahead.

The fog followed them as they turned into a street full of traffic. Its frayed edge rose and sank, was parted and joined again—now descending to the first-storey windows and blotting out the cabmen and passengers on omnibus tops, now rolling up and over the parapets of the houses and the sky-signs. It was noticeable that in the crowd that hustled along the pavement Adam moved like a puppy not yet waywise, but with lifted face, while Eve followed with her head bent, seeing nothing but his heels. She observed that his boots were hardly worn at all.

Three or four times, as they went along, Adam would eye a shop window and turn in at the door, while Eve waited. He returned from different excursions with a twopenny loaf, a red sausage, a pipe, box of lights and screw of tobacco, and a noggin or so of gin in an old soda-water bottle. Once they turned aside into a public, and had a drink of gin together. Adam paid.

Thus for two hours they plodded westward, and the fog and crowd were with them all the way—strangers jostling them by the shoulder on the greasy pavement, hansoms splashing the brown mud over them—the same din for miles. Many shops were lighting up, and from these a yellow flare streamed into the fog; or a white when it came from the electric light; or separate beams of orange, green, and violet, when the shop was a druggist's.

Then they came to the railings of Hyde Park, and trudged down the hill alongside them to Kensington Gardens. It was yet early in the afternoon. Adam pulled up.

"Come and look," he said. "It's autumn in there," and he went in at the Victoria gate, with Eve at his heels.

"Mister, how old might you be?" she asked, encouraged by the sound of his voice.

"Thirty."

"And you've passed ten years in—in there." She jerked her head back and shivered a little.

He had stooped to pick up a leaf. It was a yellow leaf from a chestnut that reached into the fog above them. He picked it slowly to pieces, drawing full draughts of air into his lungs. "Fifteen," he jerked out, "one time and another. 'Cumulated, you know." Pausing, he added, in a matter-of-fact voice, "What I've took would come to less 'n a pound's worth, altogether."

The Gardens were deserted; and the pair roamed towards the centre, gazing curiously at so much of sodden vegetation as the fog allowed them to see. Their eyes were not jaded; to them a blade of grass was not a little thing.

They were down on the south side, amid the heterogeneous plants there collected, examining each leaf, spelling the Latin labels and comparing them, when the hour came for closing. In the dense atmosphere the park-keeper missed them. The gates were shut; and the fog settled down thicker with the darkness.

Then the man and the woman were aware, and grew afraid. They saw only a limitless plain of grey about them, and heard a murmur as of the sea rolling around it.

"This gaol is too big," whispered Eve, and they took hands. The man trembled. Together they moved into the fog, seeking an outlet.

At the end of an hour or so they stumbled on a seat, and sat down for awhile to share the bread and sausage, and drink the gin. Eve was tired out and would have slept, but the man shook her by the shoulder.

"For God's sake don't leave me to face this alone. Can you sing?"

She began "*When other lips . . .*" in a whisper which gradually developed into a reedy soprano. She had forgotten half the words, but Adam lit a pipe and listened appreciatively.

"Tell you what," he said at the close; "you'll be able to pick up a little on the road with your singing. We'll tramp west to-morrow, and pass ourselves off for man and wife. Likely we'll get some farm work, down in the country. Let's get out of this."

They joined hands and started off again, unable to see a foot before them in the blackness. So it happened next morning that the park-keeper, coming at his usual hour to unlock the gates, found a man and a woman inside with their white faces pressed against the railings, through which they glared like caged beasts. He set them free, and they ran out, for his paradise was too big.

Now, facing west, they tramped for two days on the Bath road, leaving the fog behind them, and drew near Reading. It was a clear night as they approached it, and the sky studded with stars that twinkled frostily. Eleven o'clock sounded from a tower ahead. On the outskirts of the town they were passing an ugly modern villa with a large garden before it, when an old gentleman came briskly up the road and turned in at the gate.

Adam swung round on his heel and followed him up the path, begging. Eve hung by the gate.

"No," said the old gentleman, fitting his latchkey into the door, "I have no work to offer. Eh?—Is that your wife by the gate? Hungry?"

Adam whispered a lie in his ear.

"Poor woman, and to be on the road, in such a state, at this hour! Well, you shall share my supper before you search for a lodging. Come inside," he called out to Eve, "and be careful of the step. It's a high one."

He led them in, past the ground-floor rooms and up a flight of stairs. After pausing on the landing and waiting a long time for Eve to take breath, he began to ascend another flight.

"Are we going to have supper on the leads?" Adam wondered.

They followed the old gentleman up to the attics and into a kind of tower, where was a small room with two tables spread, the one with a supper, the other with papers, charts, and mathematical instruments.

"Here," said their guide, "is bread, a cold chicken, and a bottle of whisky. I beg you to excuse me while you eat. The fact is, I dabble in astronomy. My telescope is on the roof above, and to-night every moment is precious."

There was a ladder fixed in the room, leading to a trap-door in the ceiling. Up this ladder the old gentleman trotted, and in half a minute had disappeared, shutting the trap behind him.

It was half an hour or more before Adam climbed after him, with Eve, as usual, at his heels.

"My dear madam!" cried the astronomer, "and in your state!"

"I told you a lie," Adam said. "I've come to beg your pardon. May we look at the stars before we go?"

In two minutes the old gentleman was pointing out the constellations—the Great Bear hanging low in the north-east, pointing to the Pole star, and across it to Cassiopeia's bright zigzag high in the heavens; the barren square of Pegasus, with its long tail stretching to the Milky Way, and the points that cluster round Persons; Arcturus, white Vega and yellow Capella; the Twins, and beyond them the Little Dog twinkling through a coppice of naked trees to eastward; yet further round the Pleiads climbing, with red Aldebaran after them; below them Orion's belt, and last of all, Sirius flashing like a diamond, white and red, and resting on the horizon where the dark pasture lands met the sky.

Then, growing flushed with his subject, he began to descant on these stars, their distances and velocities; how that each was a sun, careering in measureless space, each trailing a company of worlds that spun and hurtled round it; that the Dog-star's light shone into their eyes across a hundred trillion miles; that the star itself swept along a thousand miles in a minute. He hurled figures at them, heaping millions on millions. "See hero"—and, turning the telescope on its pivot, he sighted it carefully. "Look at that small star in the Great Bear: that's Groombridge Eighteen-thirty. He's two hundred billions of miles away. He travels two hundred miles a second, does Groombridge Eighteen-thirty. In one minute Groombridge Eighteen-thirty could go from here to Hong-Kong."

"Then damn Groombridge Eighteen-thirty!"

It was uttered in the bated tone that night enforces: but it came with a groan. The old gentleman faced round in amazement.

"He means, sir," explained the woman, who had grown to understand Adam passing well, "my man means that it's all too big for us. We've strayed out of prison, sir, and shall feel safer back again, looking at all this behind bars."

She reached out a hand to Adam: and this time it was he that followed, as one blinded and afraid. In three months they were back again at the gates of the paradise they had wandered from. There stood a warder before it, clad in blue: but he carried no flaming sword, and the door opened and let them in,.