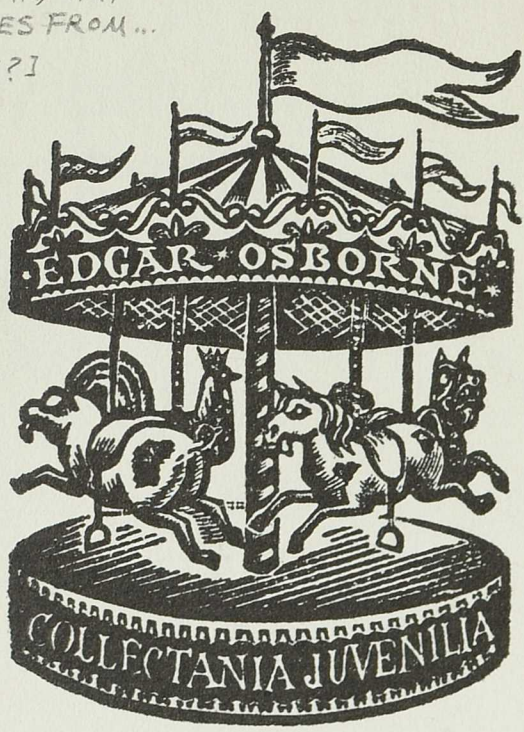


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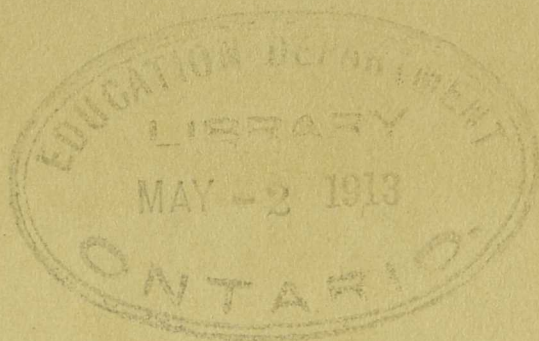
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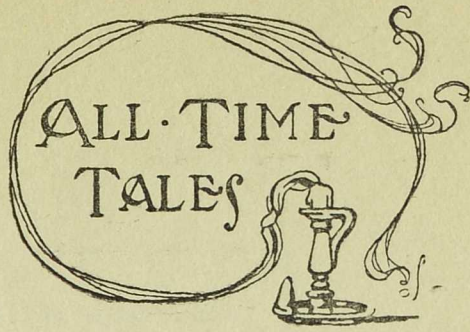


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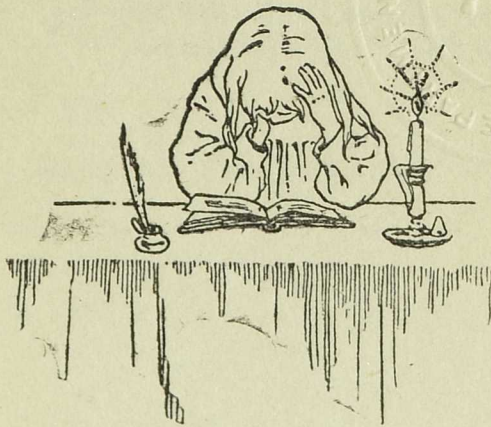
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"THE KING! BUT NO SALUTE."

TALES FROM WILLIAM MORRIS

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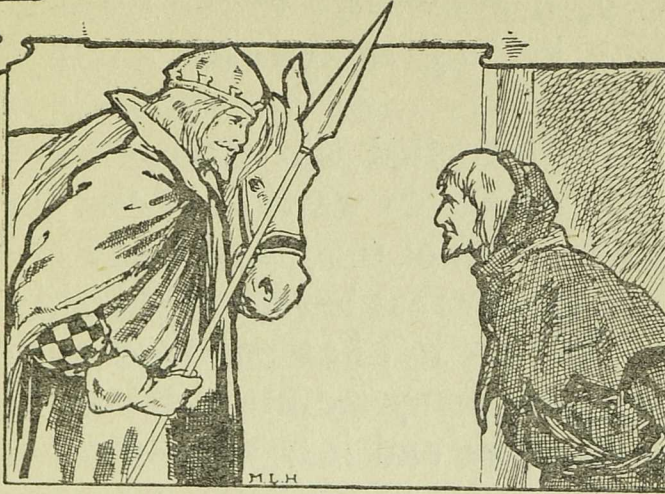
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NOTE.—“Tales from William Morris” is taken from Miss Edgar’s larger collection, “Stories from the Earthly Paradise,” in the *Told Through the Ages Series*.

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TALES FROM WILLIAM MORRIS



I.—The Man born to be King

IN the banqueting-hall of a large and beautiful palace sat a young King holding high festival amongst his courtiers. His peaceful, happy reign allowed him to foster learning at court, and as he had always gladly welcomed to his board any sage or philosopher from whom he might gain fresh knowledge, he was not surprised to see among his guests that afternoon a stranger who was clearly a man of some lore. Interested in the small wizened figure whose eyes flashed so brightly beneath his lofty forehead, the King ordered a servant to bring the new-comer before him when the meal was ended.

“Welcome, friend,” said he; “’tis plain to me that you are wise above most men. Come, will you show us wherein your skill lies? Is it in minstrelsy, in knowledge of the stars, of herbs that bring healing to the sick, or in alchemy perchance?”

“O King,” replied the stranger, “you see before you a humble watcher of the stars, one who, on the brink of the grave, looks back upon a lifetime of study that has brought him but small reward. Yet my toil has not been all in vain; I have learned many secrets that are hid from other men’s eyes, and it is on purpose to make known to you one of the sure decrees of Fate that I have made this journey to your palace.

“Think not, O King, that he who reigns after you shall be of royal stock; it is written in the starry heavens that the next to wear your crown shall be one of humble, yea of peasant birth.”

The King started in dismay. He was proud of his lineage, and it was a cruel blow to hear that he should be the last of his race to sit upon the throne which had been his forefathers’ through countless generations. Yet he was constrained to believe the prophecy when the man who thus interpreted the stars, told him also secrets of his past life which the King had wisely kept to himself.

“Nay, fear not that I shall betray what I

have learned of your history in my night-watches," cried the sage, as the King arose, threatening to silence him for ever. "I spoke of those former deeds of yours but to prove the truth of my star-reading, and now that I have given you warning of what shall come to pass, believe me or not, as you please, O King. I have fulfilled my errand. Farewell."

Having ended his speech, the little man turned from the King's presence, and, quitting the palace, was heard of no more.

As to the King, this prophecy at first caused him great uneasiness, but as the months passed by it troubled him less and less, until at length it slipped entirely from his memory.

In course of time the young King wedded a Princess of a neighbouring land, and with his love for her and his many occupations, he found life happier than ever.

One autumn day it pleased him to lead his huntsmen to the forest. The chase was exciting, and the King, following hard upon the deer, found at nightfall that he had outstripped all his courtiers, and was alone in the dense wood, far from his palace and without any chance of rejoining his men that night. He was preparing to make his bed among the bracken when a glimmering light in the distance attracted his

attention. Leading his horse by the bridle, he made his way through the tangled undergrowth, until at length he reached a clearing among the trees, where stood a rude hut, from whose half-opened door shone the light that had guided him thither. In the doorway appeared a man, grim and sad of face, who, at the King's request for a night's lodging, made answer that no one should cross his threshold that evening, for his wife lay dying within; but, he added, if the stranger liked, he might sleep in the shed close by, and he should have what fare the hut afforded.

Thankful for the shelter, such as it was, the King tied his horse to a post in the shed, and having eaten the supper of rye-bread and home-made wine, brought by his humble host, he lay down on his bed of dried fern, and fell at once into a deep slumber. Not long, however, did he sleep, for in his dreams he heard a shrill voice cry: "*Take! Take!*" and he started up with a strange terror at his heart. Finding no cause for alarm he lay down again, but scarcely had sleep come to him a second time when he awoke in distress, hearing a new echo from his dreams: "*Give up! Give up!*" Yet once more his rest was broken. He dreamed that the little old star-gazer bent over him to whisper, with a mocking smile: "*Take and Give up—you hear*

the words? The crown which old age will force you to give up, shall be taken by the child who is born to-night in this humble cottage."

These words still haunted him when he arose next morning and crossed to the hut. It was a sad sight that met his eyes there. On a heap of straw the woodman's wife lay dead; her husband, lost in grief, knelt by her side, heedless of their little new-born son, who was wailing pitifully. The room was without a window, but light from the open door streamed in across the floor of hard-trodden earth; three logs of wood served as chairs, and a rough board laid on trestles was the only table. A more miserable home it would have been hard to find in that country, but the King thought little of the misery before him, as he stood gazing curiously at the infant and brooding over his late dreams. Fierce anger instead of pity filled his heart. Was his own royal line doomed indeed to perish, and this child, son of a poverty-stricken peasant, destined to rise to the throne? The sound of a horn broke in upon his jealous musings, and, recognising the blast, he sprang to the door, and gave an answering shout, which soon brought his followers to the spot.

The woodman turned to gaze dully upon the gay troop who flocked into his hut, and who, to

his bewilderment, greeted his unexacting guest of last night as their sovereign lord.

“Thanks to this good fellow,” said the King to his huntsmen, “I found both food and shelter overnight. We must reward him handsomely for his hospitality, and in no way can we do so more fitly, methinks, than by taking his motherless child off his hands to rear at court. “Wouldst have the boy trained to be a trusty little page?” he asked, turning to the woodman, who had by this time relapsed into his former indifference, too stupefied with grief to notice the anxiety which the King strove to conceal beneath these seemingly careless words. The poor man roused himself so far as to thank the King for his offer, and knowing that without a mother the child would fare badly in his desolate hut, he agreed that the infant should be carried at once by the huntsmen to the royal palace.

A wooden box was found and a handful of hay placed in it. Then the father having laid his little one in this rough cradle, a squire came forward, and gently lifted the burden to his saddle-bow. The King fairly trembled in his eagerness to ride off with his new-born rival. He mounted his horse the moment it was brought to the door, and, handing a courtier some gold for the woodman, dashed at the head of his troop

into the dark wood. A minute later one man alone stood by the hut. It was he whose wife lay dead within and whose little son had been borne thus suddenly from his sight. He stopped to count the gold pieces that now lay glittering in his hand, and as he counted them his future lay plain before him. He would pay the priests to say prayers over his dead, and then, bidding farewell for ever to this forest, he would wander far into other lands, there to forget the tragedy of his woodland home.

Meantime the King rode with his huntsmen through the forest until they reached its farther edge, where the open country stretched before them, and in the distance a deep stream lay like a silver band across their path. Then turning in his saddle, "Ride on, sirs," he cried, "and leave with me Samuel, the squire who has the infant in his charge. It is my will to visit these fields in the valley and note the harvest there. Down by the stream we may perchance find a farm-house at which to leave the child to be nursed, until he be of age to come to our palace."

The men rode on at the word, the King watching until the last of their green coats had disappeared between the high hedgerows, when he called the old squire to his side. Samuel, like his father before him, had served at court long and faithfully, so with full confidence the

King now told him of the prophecy read from the stars, his dreams last night, and his fears that the babe they carried was fated to be his successor on the throne. "But not if I can help it, shall this weak infant grow to manhood," continued the King. "I am taking you with me to yonder bridge, where you shall drop the child in his box-cradle into the water. I would not indeed shed his blood; but only if Heaven intervenes on his behalf, shall he escape death to-day."

The old squire made a feeble remonstrance: "Doubtless, my lord, you plan wisely, for if it is I who cast the boy into the stream the guilt is mine, not yours, and willingly, as you know, would I do graver deeds than this to please my sovereign. But after all, will not the ark be rescued by some passer-by? Better, I pray you, sire, leave things as they are, nor struggle against Fate."

"Nay," returned the King firmly. "Let me but see the cradle swept into the eddies of the river and I shall have no more fear of the wise man's prophecies."

Without further discussion the two horsemen rode forward to the river, where the King, crossing the bridge, watched the squire stop midway and raise from his saddle-bow the box which held the infant. On one side of the

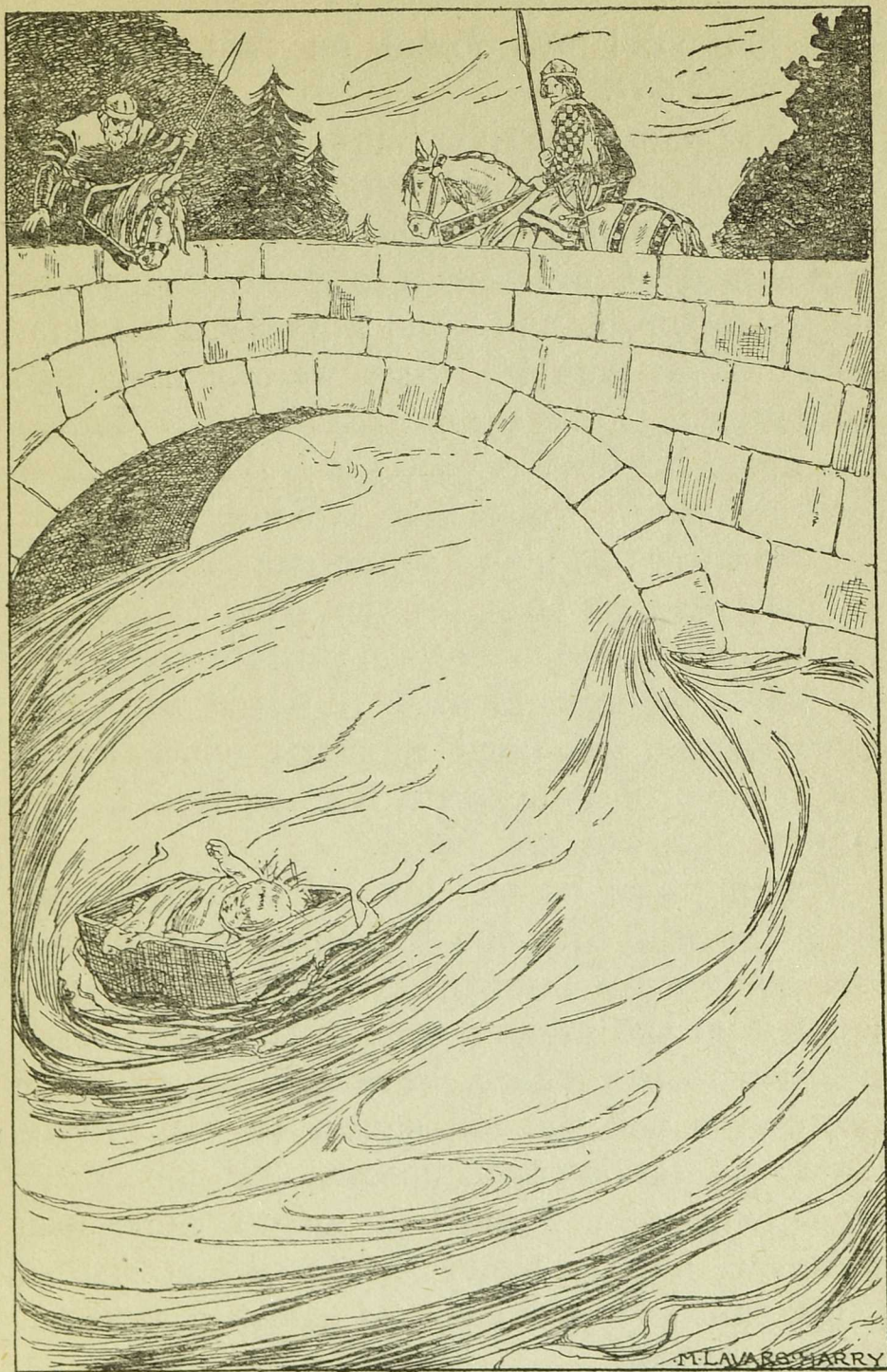
white wooden cradle he noticed that a lion had been roughly painted in red. Next moment he heard a splash, and a cry from the wakened child ; he saw the cradle whirling in mid-stream, and then, with his squire by his side, he turned, and rode swiftly from the bank. With seeming carelessness he chatted to Samuel as they pursued their way ; and if their light talk did not banish the thoughts that troubled him, these were put to flight by the news that awaited him at the palace. An infant daughter had been born to him the night before, and his delight in the little Princess Cecily soon drove from his mind the memory of the other child born that same night.

Fourteen years passed. Once more, on an autumn day, the King found himself beside the stream where he and his squire had done their cruel deed, but this time he was not alone with Samuel. He and his courtiers had spent the morning flying their falcons till, tired of sport, they halted at midday to rest on the river's bank, close by a mill. The splash of the mill-wheel was a pleasant sound in the miller's orchard ; the apple-trees, heavy with fruit, threw a welcome shadow on the grass ; and a picture of quiet charm lay before them in the group of quaint old buildings, on whose roofs the doves sat cooing gently.

No better spot than the orchard could they have found for their noonday rest. On seeing them dismount, the miller himself came hurrying to the party with fruit, junkets, and cream for their refreshment, and led the way to the shadiest spot beneath the trees. Now, the miller was short and fat, and his round red face far from handsome. By his side walked a boy, tall, seemingly, for his years, in face so different from the miller that the King on seeing them together smiled at the contrast. That grey-eyed lad can hardly be his son, thought he. "Does your boy get his good looks from his mother?" he asked his bustling host.

"Nay, sire, that I cannot tell, for he is not our child, and we know nothing of his parents. 'Twas this time fourteen years ago that my wife found him and brought him to our home, an infant that must else have died in the river." With these few words the miller disappeared through the orchard; while the boy remained standing before the King, astonished to see a look of acute anxiety and then of horror upon the royal face as the miller gave his reply.

Scarcely had the King recovered his self-command than he had to listen to a story that proved his fears were all too true. Back came the miller. He had summoned his wife to relate



"HE SAW THE CRADLE WHIRLING IN MID-STREAM"

how the child was found on that long-past September day.

Riding along the river-bank, said the woman, on her way home from market, she had heard a feeble cry, and tracing the sound to a wooden case entangled mid-stream in weeds, she waded out to the object, and lifted from the ark a little naked infant who lay there wailing with cold and hunger. From the day that she had brought him home, her husband and she had loved him as their own child. "And here, O King," she ended, "is the chest in which I found our Michael."

There was no need for the King to look at the box which she drew from beneath her shawl. He knew beforehand what it would be. Yes, there it was, fashioned of rough white wood, and on one of its sides a lion painted in red colours that had not faded.

Trusting that no one but old Samuel shared the secret with him, the King managed to conceal his painful interest in the story he had heard from the miller's wife. But after he had returned to the palace, he waited only till the morrow to call the old squire to his private chamber. Having been closeted with his master for a long time, Samuel at length came out, muttering angrily about the foolish fancies of kings, called for a horse, and galloped straight-way to the mill.

By the side of the mill-pond lay the boy whose destiny vexed the King. As he idly watched his bait float in the water, his thoughts turned to yesterday's talk, his unknown parentage, and the strange expression which the King wore while the miller spoke of his adoption. Why should his sovereign's countenance have changed as it did? Might it not be that he, the so-called son of the miller, was of noble lineage, and that the King would one day call him to play his proper part at court? What great deeds he would do if he were a knight!

In the midst of these day-dreams the boy saw the King's squire ride up to the mill. The courtier's dress was heavy with gold, his sword glittered by his side, while fastened in his doublet there gleamed a knife of rare workmanship. On its golden hilt was an inlaid spray of green leaves, round which a silver scroll bore the words, dark in meaning as in their lettering: *Strike! for no dead man cometh back!*

Michael sprang to his feet as the horseman drew rein to ask for the master of the house. The sight of the gaily dressed courtier was in keeping with the day-dreams in which the boy had just been indulging. Could this be a messenger to call him to the palace?

Samuel saw the boy's handsome face aglow with excitement, and beneath his breath he

muttered: "Truly, the lad is fated to make his mark! 'Tis folly to think that we can push him from the throne."

The miller found, a scroll was given him by the King's squire, but to read the message was beyond the good man's power. The courtier smiled: "No matter though you cannot read the words; you see the King's seal on the letter, and from that you may know that it is in truth his royal command. The orders which he sends are briefly these: it is his pleasure that the boy whom you have housed so many years come now with me to court and enter his service as a page."

The miller's cheerful face turned sad. He stood for some time, twisting his dusty cap between his fingers before he ventured a reply. "Well, be it so," he said at length; "I cannot hold back the lad, since he is no more my son than the King's, yet I had hoped to see him grow to manhood in the old mill. I meant him to be miller when I was past work, and I had even looked him out a pretty wife against the time when he should be master here. He is my right hand already, but, sore though he will be missed, I judge we must let him go with you, sir."

Michael had been meantime standing apart, dazed by the King's message. To his fancy it

seemed that life itself was changing as fast as his dreams. Gazing at the grey, wind-swept hill behind the miller's house, he could believe he saw a new country, with strange figures flitting across the long slopes, himself a knight riding to do battle with grim enemies upon these fields. Samuel's harsh voice recalled him to his senses, and he caught the sneering words: "A fine life you have planned for the lad! But what suits you, miller, might not please one of better birth—as the child's looks prove him to be, says my master. Tell me, my boy," he went on, turning to Michael, "which seems best—mill or palace, eh?"

"Indeed, sir, I have been happy here," stammered the boy, now fully alive to what was going on around him. "We have good fishing in our stream, and I never weary of my bow and arrows. Next June, our ranger says, I may quite well enter for the archer's prize at the town fair. Oh, all the year round there is something to entertain us."

This answer only amused Samuel, as the miller's words had done before. "That is a peasant's notion of pleasure; you will soon learn better. Here, miller, is a bag of gold to pay you for the lad, whom you are not to see again. You need not look for him to come back from court to visit his humble friends, so

boast not to the neighbours of his rise in life : the less said the better."

The miller gave poor Michael a kindly farewell, while his wife flung her arms round the boy. "'Tis hard to say good-bye," she whispered. "You seemed our own son, Michael, and made our home so happy. Well, well, God bless you in your new life, child."

"Come, now," Samuel broke in. "It is getting late, and we must be off, if this brave young knight is to reach the palace in daylight."

Torn between his love of the old life and his eagerness for the new, Michael crossed the stream, and climbed to his seat on horseback behind the squire. The courtier's mocking talk had hurt him as much as parting with his kind-hearted old foster-parents ; but Samuel did not vex him with further sneers, and ere long he had recovered his spirits.

In silence the travellers rode along the sedgy river-side until they reached the forking of the highway. Instead of taking the main road in the direction of the King's palace, Samuel now turned his horse sharply across the bridge on to the other road which ran from the valley up to the edge of the pine forests. Little did Michael know that he had once before been carried on the squire's horse along that road, and that for a wicked purpose Samuel had then

halted upon the bridge over which they clattered swiftly and noisily to-day.

“Are we to find the King somewhere in the woods?” asked the boy, surprised at the direction they had taken.

“Seeing that he is free to go where he pleases, you need not be astonished, need you, to learn that to-day he is visiting the black monks beyond the forest?”

Unheard by Michael the old squire murmured peevishly: “Ill betide him, I say, king though he be! Why should he compel me to do an ugly deed of this sort? It were more fitting for me to rest at home, and buy Heaven’s pardon for all the misdeeds I have already done to humour him.”

It was not long before the stout war-horse bore them to the uplands where the forest began. With a last glance down upon the sunny corn-fields of the valley, Michael turned his eyes to the wood, which, thought he, might well have sheltered trolls, fairies, or giant wood-cutters, so dark it was, so unnaturally still. As they rode forward beneath the firs, drowsiness crept over him, and he ceased to notice where they were going. It was only when he felt the daylight grow brighter that he looked up, and found that they had crossed the wood and were now on the point of descending a rough, gravelly

hill. Beyond the brushwood that fringed the lower slopes a few stunted alders and thick beds of rushes marked the windings of a sluggish stream, from whose oozy banks came the low, booming cry of the bittern. On the other side of the valley the ground rose steeply, topped by a mass of oak and holly trees, that made a heavy screen behind the dreary and forbidding foreground.

“Step to the ground,” ordered Samuel as they left the wood, “the horse will find our weight too much here.” So Michael walked downhill beside the rider, singing, as he went, some snatches of old country songs, and too happy in his own thoughts to notice that his companion was shifting uneasily in his saddle and fingering his knife. Even the hoarseness of the squire’s voice did not put him on his guard when he heard Samuel’s next words: “Come, lad, and tighten these girths.”

He bent down by the side of the old courtier to do as he was bid. Then Samuel raised his knife, and plunged it in the boy’s side. Staggering backward with a cry, Michael fell heavily on the ground. His eyes were turned towards the treacherous squire, who, deadly pale, sprang from his horse to deal a second blow, if need be. But even as he stooped over the boy, and felt his heart still beating, the faint tinkling

of a bell reached the old man's ears, and with a shudder he dropped the knife, and started to his feet. What was that tolling? Was it the avenging angel drawing near to strike him as he had struck Michael? Again the evening breeze swept the sound across the valley, and now, frenzied with terror and conscience-stricken, Samuel flung himself into the saddle. Clutching the reins tight, he spurred his horse uphill, dashed through the woods, and in the darkness of evening gained the road along which he had twice carried Michael to face death. At the bridge his outwearied horse stumbled, and fell dead; then, dazed with the horror of the boy's blood upon his hands, the old squire wandered aimlessly all night long, till by sunrise he found himself at the palace gates.

In the early morning he sought the King's presence, and told his story. "I own," he ended, "that I did not stand near and watch the boy breathe his last, but assuredly that tolling bell marked the approach of the angel of death, who must have borne away his spirit to another world. Believe me, O sire, that your young rival will trouble you no more."

The King frowned angrily. "I thought that I had sent a man of mettle to do my work, but it seems I chose only a poor weakling, whose hands tremble when they grasp a knife. Death

of my life! I doubt if your lordship ever struck the lad!"

Second thoughts, however, satisfied the King that Michael must have died of his wound, and once more he comforted himself that his crown would never pass to the woodman's son.

In return for his day's work Samuel received rich gifts from his master; but the old courtier was tired of his lifelong service of flattery and wickedness, and before many months were over, his spirit passed to its solemn account, and the last earthly honours were paid to his body in the minster.

Princess Cecily had neither brother nor sister, and when she was eighteen years old she lost her mother. That a pleasant stepmother soon took the place of the late Queen mattered little to the Princess, however, for the King had arranged that Cecily should leave her home that autumn and become the bride of a neighbouring prince. The month before her marriage was to be spent at a quiet country house of the King's, whither he would bring the young prince to see his bride for the first time a few days before their wedding.

The very day that Cecily wished her father farewell and set out with her attendants to the Rose Castle, there came to visit the King, Peter,

the old Abbot from the far side of the forest, with his sub-prior Adrian, five other monks, and a body of ten serving-men. Their business dispatched, the King invited the party to stay and sup at the palace. "I would we had every day as tall men as yours at our table, Lord Abbot," he said carelessly as he glanced at the armed men. On a sudden he felt as if he must be dreaming, for beneath one of the ten helmets there looked out a pair of bright eyes which last he had seen fixed on him four years ago in the miller's orchard, and which since that autumn he had fancied were closed in death! "Raise that steel cap, and let me see you better," he ordered, pointing towards Michael amongst the men-at-arms. "I seem to know your face. Tell me your history, my man."

Then Michael stood forward, a handsome, well-built man, his golden hair curling around a bright, sun-burnt face, and in a clear voice he told the story of his leaving the mill, and how in that lonely valley beyond the forest his companion had tried to take his life. At this point the tale was taken up by the sub-prior.

"It was that evening I was called to visit a poor charcoal-burner on his death-bed. As I bore the Host with me on my mule, I bade the boy who was to guide me to the hut, ring by my side a bell to warn all hearers of the Holy

Presence on the road. The daylight was fading as we threaded our way beneath the pines, though the skirts of the wood were still bright with sunset colours. The lad beside me was chattering foolishly of trolls and elves. Just then we heard the thud of a horse's hoofs galloping amain in the forest.

“The foolish child cried out that some spirit of the woods was rushing past, but I silenced him, holding up the Presence which never fails to guard us from danger, and we pressed forward again. We left the wood, and turned down the hillside, where the sound of the horse's hoofs was lost to our ears. At the foot of the slope we saw a figure stretched across our path. It was this Michael, our dear son, who, as he has told you, my lord, was sadly wounded. He lay with a knife in his side, while his blood flowed in a dark red stream upon the grass. We lifted him to the mule's back, and so brought him through the oaks and hollies of the next wood to the charcoal-burner's cottage—a poor dark hovel, which you may have marked, O King, while hunting in that part of the forest. The ruins of a cattle shed stand by its side, and no other building is in sight. In that hut I dressed our Michael's wound. I shrived the poor man to whom I had been brought (though indeed there was no call to do so, seeing that his illness

was not unto death). Then when I left my two sick friends there next morning, a leech was sent in my place, and under his care Michael soon recovered. He joined us at the abbey, where we taught him letters, thinking to see him a monk in after years. But bright though he is at books, and anxious to please us whom he loves, yet he cares not to take holy vows. Therefore our Father Abbot declared that he might serve God with the sword since he likes not the beads, and he was given a place amongst our fighting men. The knife he wears is the one which his false friend thrust in his side. Let the King see the blade, Michael."

The King's face had grown pale with anxiety, his eyes were wild, and his voice, when next he spoke, sounded harsh and rasping. "My Lord Abbot," he said, "methinks your man-at-arms looks better suited to live at court than in the abbey. Could you part with him, think you?"

He hardly listened to the Abbot's assent. In Michael's hand he saw the knife which he himself had given to his squire that autumn morning.

And as he stared at the words on the hilt: *Strike! for no dead man cometh back!*" he forgot everything before him, and in despair his mind wandered back to the prophecy that the lad, whom twice he had given over to death, was destined to be king.

Michael had been but ten days in service at the palace when the King sent for him, and, holding out a sealed letter, told him that he was to ride south to the Rose Castle, where the Princess Cecily was living, and there deliver his note to the seneschal. "The journey can be done in three days," said he. "My captain, Hugh, shall ride with you the first day to show you the road. Be true to your trust, my man, and this ride may change your fortunes."

In his heart the King hoped that Hugh would raise a quarrel with the new squire, and end the dispute by the sword, for no young man-at-arms could possibly escape death if he came to blows with that burly captain. But though Hugh, dark-browed and black-hearted, was a most disagreeable and insolent comrade, Michael controlled his temper, and thus an open quarrel was avoided. At the cross roads where they parted, the captain bowed low in his saddle, and raised his plumed hat with mock ceremony: "Farewell, sweet lord. You press on southward to win some prize—an earl's coronet perchance? Better that than the Princess's favour, which, I beg you to remember, is apt to lead to the dungeon."

Of this Michael took no more notice than of the many other gibes that Hugh had already flung in his face. But how glad he felt to be

quit of his companion and free to ride alone along the sweet country roads! After a night's rest at a village inn, he set out again in the early morning when the grass was sparkling with dew, and spiders' gossamer hung grey upon the hedges. Another day was spent in the saddle; another night he slept at a wayside hostel. Some six hours' riding on the third morning brought him across a bleak tableland, and then to his joy he gained the edge, from which he looked down upon the valley, where, beneath the haze of an autumn noonday, shone the grey towers of the Rose Castle. In the cornfields the harvesters were busy with the sickle, and sight and sounds alike reminded him of the happy days he had spent as a boy at the old mill. How far away were those scenes of his childhood!

Betwixt vineyards and fields of yellow corn he passed to the castle, where he found the gates standing open, and the drawbridge let down, as apparently it had been for years past. In the moat beneath his feet he saw shoals of goldfish lying amongst the water-lilies; while, as undisturbed and peaceful as the goldfish, in the archway lay the warder fast asleep, with his hand upon a harp. The quiet was broken by the sound of Michael's horse clattering across the drawbridge, and the warder

arose, stretching himself lazily, to challenge the rider. Then Michael, showing his badge of the King's service, asked to see the seneschal immediately that he might deliver his master's scroll.

“He is too busy feasting in the hall to attend to any message at this moment, so you must wait a while, friend. Come,” continued the warder, picking up his harp eagerly, “you shall sit down and hear my best song, *The Kaiser lieth on his Bier*. Don't tell me you have never heard of that famous Red Beard! Why, man, it is a real treat to listen to that ballad. And when you have had the *Kaiser*, I can give you some other very pretty pieces too—oh, well, if you don't want to listen, I am not going to force my minstrelsy on you. Perhaps you would rather go and rest in the old pleasance? You have only to cross the drawbridge, go down the stone steps on the left to the falconer's path, and at the end of that you will see the wicket-gate that opens into the gardens.”

Michael thanked him for his second proposal, which at that moment was more attractive to the way-worn traveller than the first. He promised, however, to come and hear the ballads another day; then, giving over his horse to a stable-boy, he wandered into the pleasance. The wealth of golden and crimson fruit against

the old stone walls, the soft grass paths, and the drowsy play of a fountain in the midst of the lawn—all that the gardens contained was an enchantment to Michael. Some old song of his boyhood rose now and again to his lips; soothed by the sights and sounds around him, he threw himself down on the grass beside the fountain, and there he fell asleep.

The Rose Castle sheltered a band of very happy maidens that autumn month. Princess Cecily was there, prepared to do her father's will by marrying the unknown suitor when the King should bring him to the castle, but in the meantime no idle dreams about a lover distracted her thoughts from the simple pleasures of her daily life. Surrounded by her girl friends, she wished no greater happiness than they all enjoyed from day to day in that peaceful country house; a husband, she believed, could not make her life more pleasant than it was already.

This afternoon she slipped into the pleasance with her favourite companion, Lady Agnes, and chatting merrily the two girls came towards the fountain beside which Michael lay asleep. It was Agnes who caught sight of his form in the grass, and though she glanced at first but carelessly, she was surprised into taking a longer survey the next minute.

The Princess, who had passed on without her, heard her excited voice praying her to turn back.

“Come,” she whispered, “come and see the young prince whom our gracious King has chosen to be your bridegroom. Did I not tell you he would come himself to woo you? See, he is sleeping by the mid-fountain, dressed in the guise of a court servant.”

Cecily frowned a little, and drew herself up. “Indeed, I have no wish to see my future husband,” she said coldly. “Not that I will refuse my hand if my father wishes me to marry, but for my part I would rather escape wedlock; I shall have duties enough when I, my parents’ only child, am crowned Queen of this country.”

Little Lady Agnes tapped the ground impatiently with her foot. “I have heard you say all that before, dear Princess, but I am sure you will think differently when you see this handsome suitor who has dropped from the skies. Let us run back before he takes wing to fly away.” And, seizing her mistress by the hand, she actually dragged her back to the fountain.

Cecily turned with heightened colour and a quicker breath, but there was no tenderness in her eyes when she first bent over the sleeping horseman. Yet as she gazed on his handsome features and manly, well-built figure, love all of

a sudden stirred within her heart. She never doubted that the noble-looking stranger, whose dusty dress showed he had travelled a great distance, was, as Agnes had concluded, the bridegroom chosen for her by the King himself; and that he should have come in disguise to do his wooing, pleased her fancy the more she thought it over.

She was looking down upon him with strange, shy delight when her companion, with a stifled cry of horror, turned to her, and held out a scroll of parchment. It was the King's letter to the seneschal which, falling from Michael's pouch, Lady Agnes had picked up and opened. Cecily noted her father's name and seal upon the scroll, and yet hardly could she believe that he had sent the message when she read:—

“To the Lord Seneschal of Our Rose Castle, greeting.

“The King biddeth thee instantly put to death the traitor who beareth this note. Let his head be set upon a spear at the crossways before the castle, and there let it remain until we see it on our passing—so perish the King's enemies.”

“Can we not save his life, Princess?” sobbed Lady Agnes.

“Yes,” replied Cecily, her lips white but firmly set. “I am going to find a way to save him, and while I am absent, Agnes, you must watch by

his side. If others enter the pleasance, waken him, warn him of the danger, and urge him to conceal himself."

She turned again to look tenderly at Michael before she left the pleasance. An hour ago she had not known what love could mean, and now she was ready to risk deep disgrace, to give her life even, if only she could save this stranger!

Then she ran to her own room in the castle, hastening all the more because her squires and attendants would soon be coming out of the dining-hall, and she feared to meet them lest they should notice the letter which she was carrying. Amongst her books she found a scroll that was signed and sealed by the King but had been left blank. Upon this she wrote with a firm, clerkly hand the words:—

"Kind greetings from the King unto Sir Rafe, Seneschal of Our Rose Castle.

"It is our will that the Princess Cicely be wedded to the bearer of this scroll. Question him not about his name or race; sufficient to you that we know him well and are pleased to make him our heir. Let the wedding be held the same day on which you receive our order, and let the bridegroom be acknowledged by all as master and future King."

Closing this letter, and carefully burning the grim order which she had borne away from

Michael, the Princess ran back to the pleasance. Happily, she met none of her people upon the way; and Agnes, awaiting her anxiously, took the freshly written scroll at her command, and thrust it into the sleeper's pouch in the place where the death warrant had lain.

No sooner had the Princess accomplished the plot than her courage gave way. She turned aside, pale and trembling, to think that she had defied her father's will and committed herself to marry in a few hours the stranger who had been sentenced to a shameful death. Aroused by a soft touch upon her arm, she let herself be drawn gently to the farther end of the pleasance, where her lady-in-waiting cheered her with hopeful words.

"If you will take the wine and fruit which I have just brought to the bower," said Lady Agnes, returning after a few minutes' absence, "I will sit by your feet and tell you my thoughts, Princess. It seems to my mind that there is naught to shame you in wedding this gallant and brave-looking young squire. I remember once hearing that a seer had foretold your husband should be of humble birth, so why should we fear what is, after all, Heaven's will? He is of noble mould, we can see, and is not that of more value than noble race? Be sure, dear Princess, that all will go well. Listen! I hear Sir Rafe and his train

coming, no doubt to break to you news that we already know. We must play our part bravely."

Cecily hearkened to the seneschal's message with such grave interest that her lords never doubted but that their tidings took her by surprise. With maidenly dignity she answered that she was ready to do what was required of her that day by her lord the King, and, followed by her train of attendants, she presently entered the great hall where Sir Rafe had arranged that she should meet her bridegroom. Hitherto, in sight of her people, she had moved with the stateliness of a princess, but now as she advanced towards the dais, a bright flush rose to her cheeks, her eyes fell shyly, and an unwonted timidity took possession of her, because there, at the end of the hall, stood Michael, her chosen bridegroom, the man whom so lately she had saved from death. He still wore his travel-stained riding-dress, with her father's badge upon his breast; and though he himself could hardly believe that the King's orders were true, the lords at the Rose Castle were not astonished at his good fortune when they beheld his frank and noble bearing. The strange tidings, which had as yet only perplexed him, gave rise on the instant he saw the Princess to visions of surpassing happiness. As she had loved him at

first sight, so he in his turn worshipped her winsome face before he had even heard her voice.

In simple words she bade him welcome to the castle, and told him modestly that, as her father approved him so highly, she would trustfully give him her hand, knowing that the King's choice was well. "And may you make my days as happy as I would fain make yours," she ended wistfully.

Michael's voice was very tender as he thanked her for her words and told her how eagerly he longed to show his gratitude to the King for this undreamed-of-favour. And if he would give his life for such a kind master, what could he offer to a bride whom he already adored? In their wedded life he would give her all that was his to give—honour and love unmeasured—and he prayed God that she would find him ever a true helpmate.

Then amid the ringing of the chapel bells and the solemn chanting of the choir, the bishop moved forward to the altar, where he united Cecily and Michael in a happy bond which henceforth no man could rend asunder.

On a crisp autumn morning, when the corn-fields and vineyards stood bare and the yellow leaves were falling thick upon his path, the

King came riding slowly towards the Rose Castle. It was the day on which he had intended to bring Cecily her royal bridegroom, but alas for his plans! news had reached him that his intended son-in-law had been slain in some petty war. He came, therefore, only to tell his daughter of her loss. He was drawing near the cross roads, where he looked to see Michael's head fixed on the spear, when he heard the sound of music and the prancing of many horses. This somewhat surprised him until he reflected that the tumult might arise from a welcome prepared for the young prince whom he had hoped to bring with him to-day. Just then he turned a sharp corner and came in sight of the crossways, where, behold! no rival's transfixed head, but the gayest of pageants awaited him. Heading the procession came a band of sweet-voiced maidens, dressed in gold and white robes; next minstrels, lords, knights, archers, and swordsmen, with noise of martial music and of clashing arms. It was with very grave misgivings that the King drew rein to await the explanation of this brilliant spectacle. The crowds parted. Between the two long lines of attendants walked Michael and Cecily hand-in-hand towards the horror-stricken King. Not even his irate Majesty could deny that they were well matched, for they looked equally

noble and handsome as they came forward in their royal robes, beneath a banner borne by two ancient knights. Unable to look into the eyes of the radiant couple as they reached his side, the King scowled above their heads at the old seneschal, who stood in the background. "What means this tomfoolery, Sir Rafe?" he shouted gruffly.

Cecily felt herself turn pale and faint; she clasped Michael's hand very tightly; but before anyone could answer him, the King went on: "So my young messenger got here safely enough?"

"Oh yes, your Majesty," replied old Sir Rafe, thankful to hear this simpler question; "and, following your orders, I saw the Princess wedded to him that same afternoon."

The King sat silent in his saddle. "Too late, too late now to struggle against Fate's decree," ran his thoughts. "My only child is mated to him; they must share my throne as they share all else. Ah, why did I embitter my days by this vain struggle to put down him who was born to rise to the throne? The woodman's son shall be my heir. I will yield to Fate, give up these useless plots against his life, and spend my remaining days free of the vexation that has oppressed me, time and again, these twenty years."

The battle with his feelings was successfully fought in less time than it takes to record, and the King's face relaxed. Turning to his people with a smile, he cried: "Long live my two children! Behold Prince Michael, your new King! From this time forward he shall share the throne with me, and when I go to join my fathers, he shall reign in my stead. It pleases me to see that you have already done him honour by this pageant, which, I own, took me at first by surprise. The more you see of our Prince the more you will honour him; and let me tell you now that he comes of a race that is no less ancient than our own, for ere the ancient city of Damascus was founded his forefathers had dwelt in the far East for many a generation. Think not the less of your new master, then, because he came in the guise of a squire unto the Rose Castle. I have tried him by the severest tests, and have ever found him brave, noble, and wise."

Then, leaping from his horse, the King hailed the seneschal; and in return, he declared, for his trusty services in uniting the two young people, he raised him to the rank of a duke. Thereafter he offered a hand to Cecily and to Michael, and joyfully, through the midst of applauding crowds, they passed together to the beautiful old Rose Castle.

Long and happily the old monarch and his children lived in that fair kingdom, and of all who ever wore its crown, none was more honoured and beloved of the people than King Michael, the woodman's son.

II.—The Fostering of Aslaug

WHEN Brynhild mounted the funeral pyre of her dearly-loved Sigurd and followed him to the halls of death, she left their child, the little three-year-old Aslaug, in the care of her foster-father, old Heimir.

It seemed at first that the sad news of Brynhild's end had stunned the old man, so silently he sat brooding alone; but when men saw him rise the next morning and seek his smithy, they said that he had recovered himself, and had gone to forget his grief in some wondrous piece of workmanship such as he often forged.

For ten days he worked behind closed doors, and then, somewhat to the surprise of his people, he came for Aslaug, the little golden-haired girl, and drew her away with him. They wondered the more when night fell and neither their old master nor the child returned to the house. At early morning they rose, to find the smithy door wide open, the forge cold, and Heimir's tools thrown aside carelessly, as if his cunning hands had no more use for them. The work-

shop was empty, and man and child were nowhere to be found. Then followed a long, fruitless search, until a chance whisper gained credit, and Heimir's sorrowing people came to believe that Odin had called him to his last home. And if the old hero had joined the deathless band, said they, what wonder was there that he took with him Brynhild's little child to gladden the mother's heart as she dwelt with Freia?

So Heimir passed from his home, and his people looked for him no more.

Yet was he still on earth. A night and a day he strode through the loneliest parts of his wild country—a splendid figure wrapped in a peasant's coarse grey cloak, his thin, bronzed face, eagle-like in nose and eyes, half hidden by the rim of a slouched hat. By his side hung his sheathed sword, and on his shoulder he carried a harp fashioned with strangely thick framework. Who could have guessed what was to be disclosed when, after a long day's walk, he knelt down in the depths of a quiet wood, laid the harp on the ground, and, with a touch upon some secret spring, threw open the broad bend of the framework? Within the hollow lay little Aslaug fast asleep, like a rosebud, closely bound in soft, dainty wrappings. She woke beneath Heimir's hand as he unlocked her

prison and set her free to wander on the grass. Merrily she danced amongst the flowers while the old man sat playing now sweet and glad, and now sad and solemn, music on the harp that had been his last work ere he left home. When the cool evening breeze began to stir the leaves overhead, Aslaug at last showed signs of weariness. She nestled down in his arms, and together they sat contentedly—she, prattling of her happy games, he, musing on their secret journey and its cause.

“A small thing it is for Brynhild’s sake and her child’s, to leave my home in this manner,” ran his thoughts. “There, without doubt, her parents’ foes would have sought my dear little Aslaug and tried to kill her; but now, if only we can reach Atli’s land in secret, the child will be safe in his keeping, and when my few last years are ended, she will still have in him a protector against the schemes of the Nibelungs and that hateful Grimhild. Oh! if this journey were but safely done, I care not how soon I am called from the world!”

From beneath his cloak he pulled out a small flask, containing a sleeping potion which he had himself prepared, carefully let a few drops fall between Aslaug’s lips, and as her eyes closed, lifted her gently into the hollow of the harp. A few minutes later he was again

a lonely minstrel on his way through the forest.

In the darkness of evening he walked as far as he could, unable to see where he was going, until he came to the edge of the wood, and from the hillside heard the sea-waves breaking on the rocks below. Looking round for shelter, he saw a light in a cottage window, and turned his steps accordingly towards the place. His knock at the low, tumble-down door was answered by a peevish voice bidding him come in.

Within the hovel sat an elderly woman, lean and sour-faced. When she saw the tall, grey-haired figure before her, she rose, showing herself to be of even greater height than Heimir, and fixed her ugly, light blue eyes upon him with a suspicious stare.

Her first words were to ask him sneeringly whether he had come in her husband's absence to steal his goods, and when Heimir replied that all that he sought was a night's shelter, she made him an ungracious answer.

"Well, put down that clumsy, ill-made harp of yours, that matches your dress, and no doubt your playing. You are no lordly visitor, I see."

But though she glanced mockingly at the stranger, her sharp eyes had already seen a gleam of gold beneath his coarse cloak, and she knew from his bearing that he was not a humble

wayfarer. To make certain that she was right in her suspicions, she moved up behind him, and looked again at the harp. A fringe of some fine gold cloth was hanging over a corner of its frame. This proves the man to be an impostor, she muttered to herself; and finally, brushing against his cloak as she busied herself preparing a potful of porridge, she saw a great gold circlet clasped on his arm. Had Heimir noticed her greedy stare at that moment, he would have picked up his precious burden, and braved the dangers of a night amongst the wolves in the forest rather than sleep beneath her roof. But his eyes were elsewhere, like his thoughts, and after he had taken supper, he was ready to lie down where she chose.

Telling him that her husband would soon be in, and that his ill-temper would make the cottage unbearable to a stranger, she led Heimir to the barn, and told him he might sleep in the straw. With a scowl on her wicked face, she marked that he had picked up his harp and carried it from the cottage out of her reach.

That evening her husband found her pacing restlessly about the room, impatient—unusually so—for his return. For once wealth was within their reach, she cried; all that he had to do was to kill an old grey-haired simpleton who lay sound asleep in their barn, and the

goods that he had with him would all be theirs.

The man was afraid to go out and do the deed, but he was more afraid to stay where he was and refuse, so, urged on by his wife, he crept at grey dawn into the barn with a stout spear in his grasp. Down in the straw he saw Heimir asleep, his sword laid across his knees, and his right hand resting amongst the harp strings, that even in his sleep he was plucking now and again. The faint sound of the strings made the wretch who was stealing over the barley straw, stop in sudden terror, thinking there was something ghostly in the air. Then, seeing from where the breath of music had arisen, he drew himself together, clenched his teeth, and plunged the spear deep into Heimir's heart. The old hero never awakened. His life was ended there, before he could take Aslaug the long journey to Atli's land; but perhaps from their place amidst the gods, Brynhild and he still watched over the little one, who was now left in cruel hands, far from the help which the good foster-father had forsaken his home to procure for her.

Morning came, and the wicked Grima and her husband stripped the dead man of what lay beneath his cloak, but when they turned to pick from off the harp the fringed cloth, whose end

had fluttered from it, they found, to their surprise, that it was fastened in a hinge, and that there seemed to be a secret box in the hollow of the instrument.

In hope of finding hidden treasures, they took edged tools, and broke open the hollow, wherein, to their unbounded astonishment, they saw what Heimir had concealed—little Aslaug, gazing up at them with fearless eyes.

Their disappointment would have been greater had not the child been dressed in the daintiest of silks, and wrapped in a richly embroidered shawl. These took Grima's fancy, and she roughly pulled them off the little girl, who, quite unused to such handling, and too dazed to speak, stood silent before the old hag.

It was hard that they should have a hungry child's mouth to fill, grumbled the woman, but she would make sure that, in time to come, the girl made herself useful in the house and proved a drudge worth her keep.

Question after question she put to Aslaug, and yet no word crossed the firmly-closed little lips. The child was puzzled at the new voice and hurt by Grima's rough ways, so that neither coaxing nor threats would make her utter a sound. At last the couple concluded she was dumb. They took her to the cottage, where the woman dressed her in the rags of some of her

own old worn clothes, and grudgingly gave her each day her little portion of food. From the very first, Aslaug was expected, a mere infant though she was, to fetch and carry for the elder folk whatever she had strength to lift.

She was a brave little thing, stout-hearted, and merry by nature, and before she was many years older she had learnt to take her part wisely in that miserable cottage, doing her work well, and setting her teeth to keep back her sobs when Grima's blows fell heavily upon her shoulders. Having made up their mind that the child had been born dumb, neither husband nor wife spent further time in trying to get her to talk, and she, being too shy and unhappy to do so at first, was still less willing to speak to them later. Never did they hear her voice, and never did they guess that she had the power to use it.

Grima had chosen a name for her when they could not find out her own. "I don't mind giving my mother's name to the little fright," she said, with a laugh, "so we will call her the Crow."

It was indeed a hard childhood that Aslaug spent with these people, but, thanks to her independent spirit and the light-heartedness with which she enjoyed what hours she could snatch by herself, fourteen years of that life did not make her look either careworn or gloomy.

At seventeen, she was a tall, slim girl, marvelously fair, with a cloud of deep golden hair around her face; and yet her charm did not lie in her beauty so much as in the wonderful brightness of her smile and her soft, shining grey eyes. How she came to be so lovely was the more strange because old Grima had done all she could to thwart her sweet temper. Aslaug in the cottage beside the crabbed pair was a silent girl, quick to do her work and escape out of doors to become the glad, singing Aslaug of the woods and hillside.

One spring day she was tripping after her herd of goats, which she had deserted for the pleasure of a bathe in the poplar-screened lake, and as her little white feet danced amongst the early violets and anemones, she laughed to think how Grima would scowl at her fairness if she ever chanced to look at her less casually.

“How she and her husband love ugliness!” she sighed. “When I see them sitting in their dirty dress, chuckling over their cleverness in killing the old, kind-faced man who brought me here fourteen years ago, I sometimes wonder if the whole world is not as ugly and cruel as they. Yet when I get away from them, and watch that stainless sky, and feel the good, fresh wind upon me, I know that all is well. You wouldn’t be growing here, little flowers,

would you, if the world were really a loveless place and there was no one to care for you? We are meant to be happy, and I will be."

At the edge of the woodland she stopped short in surprise, for down below, in the calm bay, lay anchored a great foreign ship, with dark, flapping sails, and a golden dragon carved on the prow. It was a sight that she had never seen near the shore, though often she had stood and watched such vessels sweeping at full sail far out on the open. Drawn up on the beach was a small boat manned by a few sailors, who had been sent ashore, as Aslaug rightly guessed, to bring back some fresh provisions to the ship.

Now, Grima's was the only dwelling to be found above the bay, so perhaps, thought the girl, the strangers would be there when she brought home her herd of goats. It would be amusing to see new faces and listen to their talk. Aslaug did not loiter on the way; her cheeks were rosy with her race downhill when she reached the door of the hovel and heard the peevish voice of old Grima raised to excuse herself: "You need not look to me to help you—I have not the strength to work as I would like—but wait till my daughter, the Crow, comes home, and we'll make her give you what aid you need."

The girl pushed open the door, and stood

silent on the threshold, barefoot and bare-headed, save that a wreath of wild flowers decked her golden hair, a ragged old gown, that had once been Grima's, making her beauty the greater by contrast with its shabbiness. The sailors stopped talking, and gazed open-mouthed at "the Crow."

One of them turned sharply towards the old woman.

"We don't need two eyes to see that this is not your own child," he said.

Grima was furious. "She's not like me, is she not? I can tell you I was better looking than that hussy when I was her age. Aye; and her mother has a tongue like other honest folk, whereas the Crow is dumb as a worm. Well, I don't complain of that, for she works the better, I daresay, because she is tonguetied, and she hears all that is said to her. Now start your baking, and she'll bring you more wood if you need it."

In time the loaves were baked, though how the men did their work they could not have told, for their sole thought was of the dainty maid who worked amidst them; and much the others envied him who stood beside her and had the joy of taking the flour from her sweet hands. When no further excuse could be found for lingering in the cottage, they bade good-

night to mother and daughter, as Grima insisted they should be called, and, mazed and thoughtful, returned with their sacks of bread to the great ship. They need not have troubled to carry the loaves so far; the first bite proved that the bread was fit only to be thrown overboard! Such an outcry the rest of the crew raised against the unfortunate bakers that news of their sorry performance came to the ears of their master himself. He questioned them chaffingly about the baking.

“Ah! prince,” they stammered, “there is not a man alive who could have done any better in that cottage. It was not the blear-eyed, yellow-faced old woman who put us off our work—oh no! It was the young girl who came in, sweet, glad-eyed, and fresh as the spring flowers in her chaplet; and when she moved amongst us—fairer than Freia we vow—our wits were scattered, and we were struck as foolish as the Greak Auk!”

“Nonsense!” answered their lord. “You are making too much of the girl’s looks. Was hers, in truth, the fairest face you had ever seen? Was she—well, was she as beautiful as the Lady Thora, my lovely wife, now dead?”

One and all, the men replied that, to their mind, the girl was more charming even than Thora, exquisite though her beauty had been.

“If the gods have indeed made two such women, they have done passing well,” remarked the prince. “I must see the peasant girl myself and listen to her voice.”

“But, my lord, the old crone told us her daughter was born dumb,” said one of the men. “The maid speaks not a word.”

“Well, I can at least see her,” returned their lord; “but as my vow at Yule-tide, not to set foot on land until I entered the lists at Mickle-garth, holds me here, you shall go back to the cottage, and ask her to come aboard for a little time. Tell her that she will be treated with all honour, as though our ship were her father’s home.”

The message was taken to Aslaug next morning, and as she could not then answer the seamen in words, she gave her assent by signs. Grima listened to the invitation in sullen anger, but she feared to offend the men who had brought her good pay for the meal and flour that they had taken from her, and since the girl’s visit to the ship was to be a short one, it seemed too small a matter to object to. She, therefore, wisely held her peace, although the scowls upon her face were eloquent of her feelings.

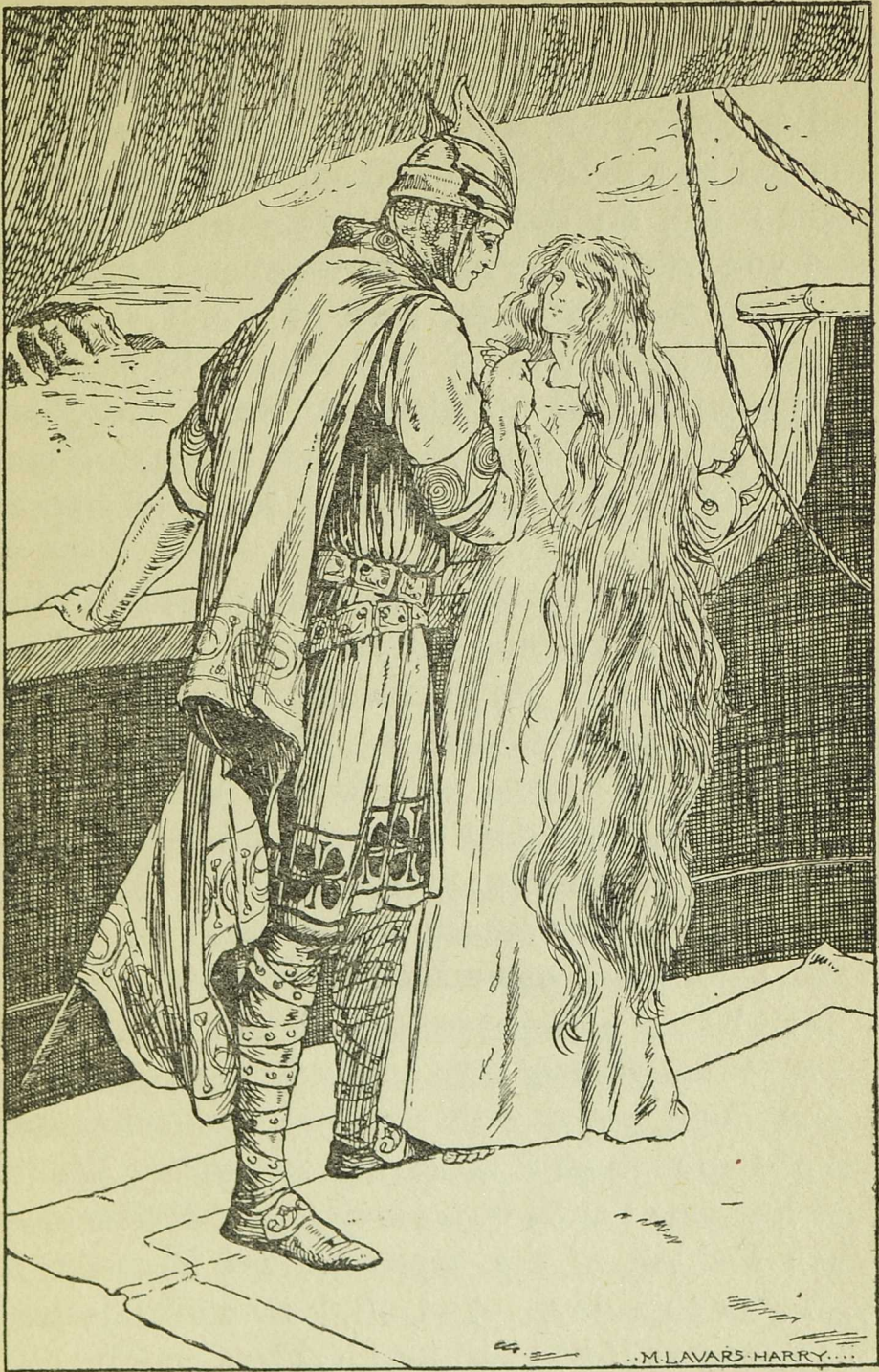
What a happy day Aslaug spent in looking forward to her visit to the ship! She had been

amused watching the rough sailors in Grima's cottage, where hardly ever a stranger crossed the threshold, and she had been content to look at the beautiful golden-prowed vessel lying out in the bay, but what an unexpected joy to be asked to come on board, and meet the lord of these men and master of the great ship! As, towards evening, she set out for the shore, she was dreaming joyously of the treat that it would be to stand on deck, with the green sea lapping all around her, to see the well-ordered floating palace that the seamen had described to Grima, and, above all, to be beside the great lord Ragnar, whom they praised so heartily. At the thought of meeting him, however, she paused in distress. What would he, a king's son, think of her ragged old frock, through which one of her white arms was actually peeping at the shoulder? She kept herself so fresh and pretty that her bare feet and head made her look but the sweeter, yet do what she might, her frock was hopelessly dingy, and she flushed rosy red with vexation when the breeze shook out its tattered folds. Then she laughed happily at a new thought. She untwisted her hair from its long plait, and down it fell in great waves to the very edge of her skirts, covering her ugly dress like a mantle of gold.

So it was that the seamen saw the girlish

figure run down to the beach, wrapped in a cloud that was ruddy gold against the rays of the setting sun. Ragnar, their lord, was impatiently awaiting her coming, yet when his men had rowed her out in their light boat from the shore, his welcoming words were few, and, as he felt, all too poor for the ears of a guest so wondrously fair. For to see her was to worship her beauty. All through the ship he led her courteously; and she, overjoyed at all that had come to her that day, thought not of speaking until she was alone with him beneath the golden canopy at the stern; then, to his great joy and surprise, she opened her lips, and breathed to him the first words she had spoken to any man since Heimir left her: "Oh, if I but knew that you, my lord, were as happy as I!" And in a little while she knew that he was even so, for love took sole possession of his heart, and, bending down, he told her that this was the sweetest hour that he had ever spent. The sun had not gone down that night before the Danish prince had prayed the maid to be his wife and sail away with him in his great ship; but Aslaug shook her head.

"No, no," said she; "it is not that I care little for you, but you are born to be a king, and I have been brought up as a foundling by poor peasant-folk who could teach me little.



RAGNAR AND ASLAUG

You love me to-day; but what if you found I were no fit helpmate, and tired of me after I had become your wife? You say I would aid you to live a noble life like your father's? Then listen: Go, do the deeds that your men have said you are on the road to essay. If you can do them the better for love of me, I shall be proud indeed, and if you come back from Micklegarth still minded to make me your bride, you will find me here thinking of you every day, Ragnar, and praying for your happiness."

To these words the prince answered firmly: "My heart is yours from to-day to the end of my life. I will go on to Micklegarth, as I vowed at Yule-tide, and see if I can win fame. And if I fall by the sword, and you in after years become the dear wife of another—it may well be a great king—you must sometimes say to yourself: 'Ragnar the Dane loved me to his death; his heart was mine even to the end.'"

But Aslaug's bright eyes were fast filling with tears at this gloomy talk. She broke in hastily: "You must not say things like that when we are sad enough as it is, saying farewell. Whatever happens I shall go on loving you, and be glad when I think of the happy time I have spent with you this day. And oh, how sweet it will be to see you if you sail into our bay once again!

“I want you to remember,” she went on very seriously, “that I am only a poor goatherd girl who lives in cowardly fear of the cross old woman for whom she works. You must not dream that I am anything better, and if your high station requires you to marry a lady of noble birth, then you must give up thinking of me.”

“Yes,” said Ragnar, with a smile; “of course, my second wife must be as noble as was Thora, the wife whom I have lost; and you, of all women, have alone seemed to me her equal. Look, Aslaug,” and he stooped over a chest, and lifted out an exquisite garment, “this is the manner of dress that should be yours, my queen; I pray you to take it now and wear it in token of my love.” These last words he said somewhat haltingly, from fear that she might be hurt at his noticing the meanness of her attire.

Aslaug, however, put him at his ease when she laughingly refused. “Why, it is too fine for any but a goddess to wear! As for my taking it, that would never do. If I should see you no more, the gift would remind me of you too sadly; and even if, as I trust, some happy day will bring you back to me, I could not meanwhile wear this rich clothing in a smoky cottage or out on the hill herding my goats, could I? The first person to wear it would be

Grima, the old peasant woman who keeps me. Nay, look not so angry," she cried as she saw him flush hotly at Grima's name, and lay his hand on his sword, as though he would strike down the person who dared touch Aslaug. "We must not vex ourselves over her ill-temper. Why, my daily troubles will seem easy to bear now that I can dream of your returning to me."

Though loth to part from her, Ragnar had at last to watch Aslaug leave his ship and cross the sands to the cottage over the hillside. A long, long time he stood wrapt in thought of her, after her slight figure had been lost to his yearning eyes in the soft spring twilight.

Then the tide came flowing in, and, rousing himself from his reveries, the Danish prince gave orders to put out to sea; the banks of oars bent to their work, and next morning, when Aslaug scanned the water, the ship was far out of sight, bearing fast towards the land where Ragnar was to win great glory.

The love of Ragnar sweetened Aslaug's life for the months to come. She had found a new joy in the world, and though she sometimes trembled to think that her lover might never return, she tried hard to dwell only on her happier thoughts—the memory of that afternoon

spent in the ship and the hope of seeing him sail back for her some glad day.

And that day dawned at last.

One bright May morning, twelve months after Ragnar's visit to the bay, she was busy making ready the early meal in the cottage, old Grima, sour and peevish as ever, muttering discontentedly beside her, when the door opened and Grima's husband came hurrying in.

"There they are back again!" he exclaimed. "They have come to work us ill, I'll be bound. I have often thought to myself that it was folly to let our dumb witch, the Crow, make friends with them, Grima. The girl will yet cause us to pay for the slaughter of the minstrel fifteen years ago. Do you think these seamen can have scented that murder?"

"Oh, hold your tongue!" cried his wife angrily. "Do you mean that the strangers who baked their bread in this house last year are on their way to us again? That's nothing to be afraid of, old white-liver; I only hope they pay us as handsomely this time as last. Why should you begin chattering of such ill things as misfortune, and the Crow, and the fool whom we dispatched once upon a time? The sailors have nothing to do with our little concerns."

Her talk was interrupted by a voice from the threshold: "Where is the lovely maiden whom

we have come over seas to find and who once lived here? Dwells she still in this cottage?"

Aslaug with a beating heart had listened to the goodman's news of strangers on the road. She had been bending over the fire as she stirred a handful of meal into the pot, and even at the seaman's hearty shout she did not turn round nor raise her head.

Grima's downtrodden husband saw a chance of putting himself forward, and made answer in whining tones.

"The girl is still living on my bounty; poor as I am, I have fed, clothed, and sheltered her these fifteen years. Heaven knows what rich rewards we deserve for all the kindness we have shown the dumb creature!"

The men did not trouble to point out that Grima had told them the girl was her own child and that the goodman had now given away the secret.

"Waste not our time with your lying words," answered a sailor shortly. "If the chosen wife of our prince wishes you to swing upon the gallows for your treatment of her, we will be happy to do her bidding. Ah, there she is! All hail to you, lady!"

Aslaug was carrying the bowl of porridge from the fire to the rough table, when the sailor, catching sight of her, ran forward to do the

humble task in her place. But she, smiling her thanks to him, passed on, and herself set the dish on the table; then, turning to the group, she opened her lips, and, to the amazement and utter confusion of the peasant couple, spoke in the prettiest of voices, clear and sweet:

“Methinks you must have come with tidings from the good lord Ragnar who saw me on his ship last spring-tide.”

“That is so, my lady,” returned the chief of the party. “Our prince has fulfilled his vow, and done great deeds of valour in Micklegarth. Now he is back in your bay, eager to claim the bride of whom he has told all his men, and yet, at times, torturing himself with fears lest you may have ceased to care for him, have found a king perchance to marry, or may even lie cold and dead in the grave. So much did he fear bad news at this cottage that he would not come himself to seek you. He charged us, if we found you, to beg you to join him on his ship this very morning. Each hour he finds hard to bear while he is longing so impatiently to see you at his side.”

“I shall go straightway,” she answered, “for I am fain to be with him whom I love with my whole heart. But as I leave this cottage never to return, I would give this needy couple something to make their lives the easier. Have you

aught of my lord's with you? Methinks he would gladly give me what I wish."

"My lady, we have dainty gifts sent you from our prince, if so be that you would deck yourself to come aboard, and all the gold and gems we carry with us are at your disposal alone."

"Then I shall make use of my kind lord's presents," said Aslaug. "Not that I will wear these fair robes to-day, for I would rather the prince saw me once more as the humble peasant girl that I am, and whom he loved last spring-tide in spite of her poverty and rags. But his other gifts I would take from your hands and leave them to those who have, at least, sheltered me these fifteen years."

"See, Grima, the jewels shall be yours, and this gold is for your husband. If words could bring you happiness, I would wish that good might still befall you, but methinks wishes are vain when your evil moods must surely bring you greater misery year by year. At anyrate, think not that I harbour angry thoughts against you. Fare ye well."

Could anything more unlooked for have happened in that wretched cottage? "The Crow," whom man and wife had treated with such contempt, was called to be the wife of a great prince, and she who had been dumb before them

all those years, had bidden them farewell in gentle tones and left them a store of gold and jewels!

There was great rejoicing in the hovel over the prize left by the kind-hearted maiden, but how different from that greedy joy was Aslaug's gladness when she joined Ragnar in his splendid gold-prowed ship!

And that his bride was the high-born daughter of Brynhild and great Sigurd became known to the Danish prince, when next morning Aslaug told him of this vision that had come to her as she slept:

"The stars were glittering brightly above our snow-laden earth as I rose high on the night wind to a realm of fire, and through the flame, passed to a fair palace built all of gold. At my approach, the palace hall rang with the blare of trumpets, and the noble king upon the throne turned to his queen to ask the reason of the outburst.

"'Tis the noise of Ragnar's fame,' she answered him.

"And that maiden figure that now glides through our halls?'

"'Tis Aslaug, our child, whom I left on earth when I came to join thee, my Sigurd—she who is now the bride of great Ragnar.'

"And methought that the noble pair smiled

on me kindly as I left their fire-girt palace in the heavens."

"I, too, had a strange dream," said Ragnar in his turn.

"At grey dawn I was wandering upon a waste strewn with the armour of dead men and the bleached bones of those who had once fought there. A great light shone afar, and I, drawing near to it, sought ever to win my way through a rampart of flames, but could not. Then where I, in my frailty, could not walk, two figures passed through the fiercest of the fire unscathed. Great Sigurd and Brynhild came from out that brightness, and, hailing me, set in my hand a fair, white lily. This flower I cherished, placing it in the soil, and tending it carefully, and lo! the grey, sunless dawn turned to glorious day, the waste place became a garden of sweetest blossoms—and all because you, my love, the white lily from Brynhild's bosom, had been sent to change my life of cheerless warfare into days of love, happiness, and peace."

III.—The Proud King

IN a far distant country there once lived a King who was surpassingly rich and powerful. From his earliest manhood he had always gained what he wished: first a beautiful wife, then, abundance of riches and a vast kingdom, to which he added many other lands by conquest. But his good fortune did not make life happier for those around him. Every year of prosperity left him more self-satisfied, till in time his vanity became intolerable. Even the most accomplished flatterers lived in fear of offending his pride. No one, said he, was worthy to sit at meat with him; it was death to a courtier to address him without his leave.

Now, one summer morning this king awoke early, and, to amuse himself, he began to count up all the riches that were his and the great deeds that he had done.

“What a record is mine!” he cried exultantly. “I have made my kingdom ten times the size of my father’s. The plot of land where the first king of the country built his town and palace only suffices to-day for our royal kennels! Well may men bow down before me, for surely I am

too great a king to be swept away by death. If I have risen so high above the common lot, why should I not rise still higher, and enjoy an unending life on earth? For aught I know, that may be my destiny!"

With these vain thoughts King Jovinian soothed himself to sleep, and did not waken again till the sun was high in the heavens. A glance at the bright sunshine that played upon the fresh green leaves outside his window reminded him that it was a morning for the chase. His huntsmen were summoned when their master was ready, the hounds bayed eagerly on the leash, and the party swept merrily from the courtyard.

Deep into the forest they galloped, their red coats scattering amongst the trees; there the King, whose horse was the swiftest in the land, soon outdistanced the others, and was lost to their sight in the glades that stretched far before them. For many hours Jovinian rode on in hot pursuit of the stag till, breaking through the edge of the forest, he found himself on a grassy riverside shaded by trees. Heated with his long ride, he thought nothing could be more delightful than a swim in the stream, so, tying his hunter's reins to a tree, he threw off his costly dress, and plunged into the cool depths.

The clear, flowing water proved even more

refreshing than he had expected, and it was long before the King swam leisurely to the bank. When he came to look for his robes, great was his surprise, and still greater his indignation, to find that clothes and horse alike had disappeared. Had some thief run away with them? Woe betide the villain when he was caught! Cooled by his dip in the river, the King grew hot again—this time with anger. But though it was meet that his Majesty should vow vengeance on the culprit, it was less fitting that he should stand there, naked, on the bank. He raised his voice, and called loudly on his courtiers. Alas! no answer came, cry as he might. A finch or two, startled by his shouts, rose on the wing, but fluttered carelessly back to their leafy perch when they saw the harmless nature of the alarm. For the first time in his life Jovinian found no one to attend to his wants. What should he do, he wondered. Not far from the riverside he would find a snug manor-house, built lately by his orders for the chief ranger of the forest, who, loyal subject that he was, would be only too glad to offer his monarch clothing and refreshments, the best he had to give. Knowing the road to this house, the King hurried forward. A most distressing walk it was, for the hot rays of the sun beat on Jovinian's unprotected skin, and oh! how hard it was to trudge afoot when

but an hour ago he had been astride the finest horse in the kingdom. The thought, however, of the kind entertainment he would receive from his ranger was some comfort to the unhappy King.

“Courage!” he murmured to himself. “Before long you will be sitting at ease in a cool chamber, dressed (thank Heaven!), in dainty summer robes, and sipping a draught to banish the memory of this miserable afternoon.”

But what of the huntsmen in the meantime? While they roamed through the forest they met a horseman who, riding Jovinian’s hunter and wearing the King’s dress, resembled their absent lord so precisely that all saluted him as king, and, without any misgivings, rode back with him to the palace at nightfall. In hall and council-room the stranger played the part of Jovinian, and not even the Queen herself guessed that it was no longer the true king who sat on the throne.

All went well, then, with those who returned to court, but fortune did not favour poor Jovinian in his forlorn state. When he came to the ranger’s house he blew, as was the custom of those days, on the horn hanging by the doorway. The porter looked out from behind the grating, and seeing a man stand, the horn at his lips, without even a cloak about him,

he rubbed his eyes to make sure he was not dreaming.

"How now?" he shouted gruffly. "What tempts you to go bugling without livery? We don't buy skins in warm summer weather; no need to show us yours! Home with you, and find something to put on!"

"Fool!" cried the King, furiously angry, "throw open the gate this instant. It is Jovinian, your king, who stands here. Let the master of the manor know that his liege lord has come desiring clothes, food, and rest. Make haste, fellow, if you wish to find pardon for your rash insults."

The porter roared with laughter. "Sure, this is all a dream! Now, don't you see this solid gate melting into thin air? Step through, my man!" Then with another mocking laugh he disappeared; and the King, left to himself, beat madly against the door. Just as suddenly as he had vanished, back came the porter, and unfastened the heavy bolts.

"Enough of that noise," he said. "I will give you your heart's desire, and lead you before my master. On my solemn word, he will make you sorry you ever asked to see him. And if I am blamed for bringing you in, I will make you sorrier. Quick march!"

The sun was streaming through the western

windows of the hall where the ranger sat in his oak chair, a glass of wine at his side, enjoying a quiet hour at the end of his long day's work. With pride and pleasure his eyes turned from the rich carvings of hunting scenes along his walls to the trim gardens that lay around the house. A squire at court, without lands of his own, he had been rewarded for years of faithful service by a gift of house and grounds when, twelve months ago, the King had appointed him to the charge of the royal parks and forests. Many a visit had Jovinian paid since then to his trusty retainer in his new manor.

This afternoon the ranger's pleasant reveries were to be interrupted. The sound of rude laughter in the courtyard floated up through the open windows, and at the same time a servant entered the hall to tell his master, with a scarcely suppressed smile, of the strange, unclothed visitor who stood waiting admission.

"The fellow calls himself our king—though beyond the trimming of his beard there is no likeness whatever. He clamours for a hearing, sir. Will you have him brought before you?"

"Aye, bring him in," said the ranger; "we must see that he is not acting the madman for some evil purpose. I'm sure I wish he had chosen any other hour than this to break in upon us. Well, well, where's your man?"

Speechless with anger, Jovinian had followed the porter from the lodge. He had run the gauntlet in the courtyard, where the serving-men had jeered at his appearance; but at last, thought he, as he came before the ranger, wrongs would be righted, and his retainer's household would once more pay him every honour when their master recognised his sovereign.

"You are surprised to see your king stand before you without his royal robes," he began, "but I shall soon explain by what accident this has come about, if you will first be good enough, Hugh, to give me the cloak that lies beside you. You, of course, can recognise royalty though it is stripped of its trappings, but unfortunately, your servants have failed to do so. What! Do you mean to say you don't know me?" Here the King stopped short, for he found the ranger looking at him not with reverence, but with pity.

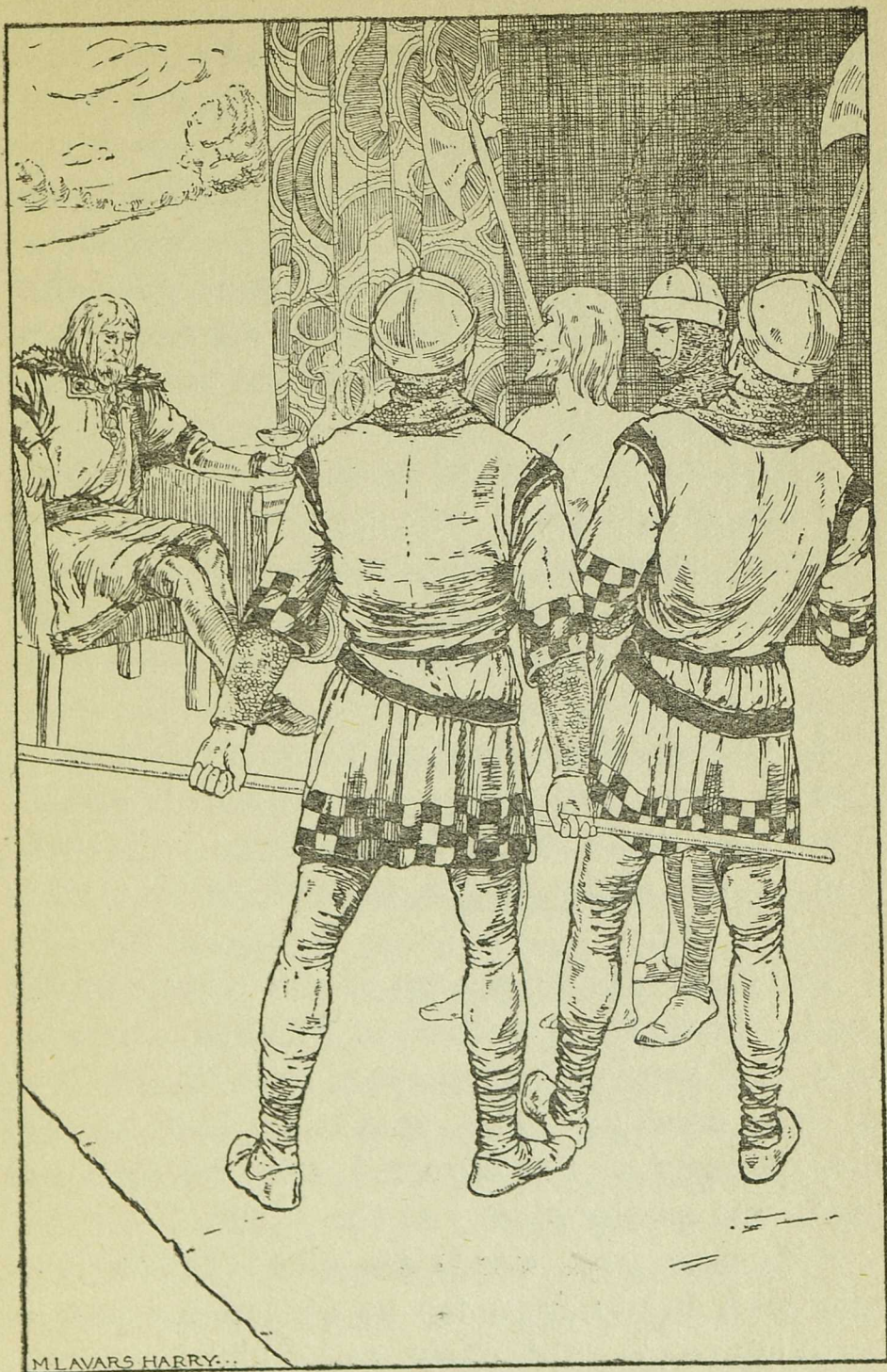
The master of the manor turned to one of his serving-men. "The poor creature is mad," he said quietly. "Take him away; give him food, clothing, and a night's shelter, and, above all, see that he is treated kindly. We can do little else for him. But, thank God, the sick in mind sometimes recover."

When Jovinian saw that the ranger would not believe he was anything but a commoner,

and that he thought him quite crazy, he fell into a fierce passion. Bitterly he cursed his late favourite, calling him a hateful traitor and an ungrateful wretch; then in his fury he shook off those who would have held him back, and madly rushed from the hall, out of the gates, and on to the highway again.

His sudden flight made the ranger the more certain that he was a madman. "When next I see King Jovinian," said he, "I must tell him of this poor, moonstruck pretender. But hearken, my men, let us try now if the harp will not banish the memory of that unhappy wanderer. 'Tis churlish to sit moping in this paradise which my good lord has made over to me. Call me my minstrel anon."

Out on the quiet country road Jovinian ran blindly forward, knowing not, nor caring, where he turned, until, in the deepening shadows of evening, he sank down, spent in mind and body, on the grassy borders of the highway. The twilight softly changed to the blue stillness of a summer night, and still the King lay half senseless. Hours might have passed—he took no measure of time now—when far down the road he saw a twinkling light gleam through the darkness. Nearer and clearer it grew, until it resolved itself into a forest of torches that flickered round the litter of some nobleman.



“HE CAME BEFORE THE RANGER”

Besides the torchbearers, men-at-arms were also in attendance; and Jovinian sprang to his feet as he saw that their livery bore the badge of one of his most intimate counsellors, old Duke Peter.

Maddened by all that he had undergone that day, and suspicious that his courtiers had plotted his downfall, he determined to challenge his old friend.

“Ha! my lord Duke,” he shouted, high above the din of trampling feet, “go you to-night to join my enemies? The world, it seems, has turned against your master, and you, you wily old fox, will begin doubling too. You were ever a scheming rascal!”

A man-at-arms stepped forward, and gave him a light tap with his sheathed sword. “Say that again to the Duke’s face! You will find it no cheap game to rail at his lordship.”

The litter was drawn up in the middle of the road. Beneath the flare of torches Jovinian saw the haughty, keen-eyed, thin-lipped face of his courtier, who yesterday had smiled obsequiously at the crowned monarch and to-night was gazing stonily at the pariah.

“My man, your words are wild. If you have met with injury from me or any of my people come up to me in daylight and I will hear your

grievance then. Trouble, methinks, has bereft you of your senses."

The calm, indifferent tone in which Duke Peter addressed him was a further aggravation to the forlorn king. "Look! Look!" he cried. "Do you not see that I am Jovinian, your master, to whose favour you owe the very gems that sparkle on your fingers?"

"A madman's ravings! Be thankful, my poor friend, that your folly has not led you to tell your fancies at the King's throne. You would meet with scant consideration there. This silver piece will buy you food and clothing on the morrow. Take it, and follow my advice: keep beyond reach of his Majesty's officers. They are bound to mete out the sorest penalties to one who trifles with that august name. Forward, my men."

Before he knew what had happened, Jovinian was left alone on the highway, holding in his feeble grasp the coin that Duke Peter had pressed upon him—a coin stamped with his own image, sceptred, crowned, and in his royal robes, his jewelled feet resting upon a globe, as if to show how high he stood above the rest of the world.

The lights of the Duke's retinue glimmered awhile down the road, and then were lost in the darkness. Jovinian followed slowly in the same

direction—why, he could not have told. Each step grew feebler; drowsiness stole over him, and he flung himself down in a grassy hollow to forget his misery in deep, dreamless sleep.

At dawn he awakened to very different thoughts, as well as in very different surroundings, from those of the preceding morning. His first feeling was one of wretchedness, but the bright sunshine, the freshness of the air, and the fragrance of opening flowers soon bred in him a new spirit of hope. He looked around, and saw that he was not far from the gates of his royal city. Already country folk were astir, bringing their goods to market, and as the doors were not yet thrown open, a number of waggons had gathered under the walls. By hiding now and then in the hedgerows to avoid the peasants hastening along with baskets of fruit, butter, and eggs, he was able to steal up to the gates without being seen. At the crowded portals, however, it was impossible to escape notice. There was a loud outcry against a man coming undressed to such a public place. Yet the country folk, with all their roughness, were not unkind; many of them took note of Jovinian's evident distress, and judged rightly that his clothes had been lost in some untoward accident. An honest fellow called him to his waggon, gave him a bowl of milk, and bade him jump up

and hide amongst the piles of cabbages and sweet flowers that he was taking to market.

“You are bound for the city, if I am not mistaken. Whoever you are, and whatever your business, you don’t seem over-happy in Adam’s garb. Come up beside me, and when you are under cover you can tell me your tale.”

Jovinian settled himself beside the countryman, and, fearing that his claims to kingship would once more be scoffed at, he began a different tale.

“I am a merchant from distant parts. On my journey last night I met with thieves, who stripped me of purse and all that I had, and now I must seek my only friend in this town, a squire at the King’s palace. He will be glad, I know, to lend me what I ask. Only set me down at the palace gates, and I will soon be in a position to pay you handsomely for this morning’s kindness. Tell me your name, friend, and where you live.”

“Christopher-a-Green is my name, and my cottage you see across those fields. It’s that little bit of garden and orchard that give me the second half of my name and the whole of my living. Thank God, we have always food enough, and we’ve a roof above our heads—though we may not be able to keep it there much longer. My granddad, you see, built the cottage, and now that it has come to need

mending my bushes seem less inclined than ever to grow gold pieces.”

“Wait,” said the pretended merchant—“wait till I have seen my counting-house again, and I will show you I am more grateful than your bushes for all your attentions.”

It was not long before the waggon stopped at the gates of the palace courtyard, and after waiting a minute or so, till the place happened to be clear of onlookers, Jovinian slipped from the cart, nodded farewell to the countryman, and ran unnoticed through the outer court. But troubles commenced again when he reached the inner gate. A serving-man caught sight of him: “Out! Out!” he shouted. “Get out of this courtyard!”

The King turned at his words. “Why, my good fellow, you are too hasty. Do you not see it is your sovereign whom you have addressed? Speed you and bring me robes, and your foolish mistake you have just made shall not deprive you of a rich reward.”

“Madman!” ejaculated the servant. “To call yourself his gracious Majesty! The sergeants of the guard must take you in hand.” And he marched Jovinian to the guard-room.

Surely amongst his men-at-arms, thought the King, some one would have eyes to see his master. But no, not a man knew him in his

hapless state. They stood around their captive in the guard-room, and the more he tried to persuade them, the more they ridiculed the idea that he was their lord. Despair had seized him when two sergeants entered the room.

“His Majesty orders us to bring before him the man who has so presumptuously used his most honoured name.”

“’Tis my last chance,” murmured Jovinian. “In my own hall I shall face the Queen and all my noblemen. If they will not acknowledge me I am for ever an outcast.”

With beating heart he walked between his two guards, his hands bound and his head bent down. The moment he crossed the threshold of the audience-hall he raised his eyes to the throne where he had so often sat in judgment. Beneath it he saw the Queen in her accustomed seat, surrounded by ministers of state. But to these he paid no heed, for his whole attention was given to a figure on the throne. To his unutterable astonishment he found that his place had been taken by another man! Dressed in Jovinian’s robes, crowned, and holding in his hand an ivory sceptre, sat a stranger to whom the court was paying full reverence. Undoubtedly he was the image of their master, yet to Jovinian’s eye alone there was one marked difference—the face of the supplanter was strangely

bright, and his brow shone with a heavenly calm. As the forlorn King stood in amazement and dismay before the throne the regal figure spoke in clear, stern tones.

“Is this the man who has mocked my majesty?”

Jovinian nerved himself to answer firmly. “I am the true king. Yesterday those lords paid me the homage which to-day they are rendering you. Yet though the whole world turn against me, though all hope of restoration perish, to the end of my desolate life I cling to at least my name. I am Jovinian the king.”

“Nay,” said the other; “that speech shows a fevered mind. Heavy is the penalty you deserve for your pretensions. But before your sentence is pronounced, the Queen and the lords present shall give their decision as to which of us is king. List you, poor madman; and you, my gentlemen, declare your judgment.”

The courtiers turned unhesitatingly towards the throne, bowed low, and together replied: “Hail, King Jovinian! Long live your Majesty!”

At the same time the Queen mounted the steps of the throne, and knelt to kiss the jewelled feet of the man to whom she softly made answer. “My lord, your loving wife knows well that you are Jovinian.”

“You hear these answers,” said the crowned

stranger to the uncrowned king. "And now, by the laws of our country, we may well put you to death. No punishment, however, will be inflicted if you straightway own upon your knees that you are a base pretender, and when you cease to call yourself king, you shall be given a place among our servants."

The pallor on Jovinian's face was chased away by a sudden rush of colour that spread even to his brow.

"Nay, nay," he cried hastily. "I will meet death at your hands rather than yield to your rule. I was born to a station high above other men, and I scorn to humble myself."

The other sat and gazed at him thoughtfully for a time. His calm face lost something of its sternness, and pity showed itself more plainly when at length he broke silence. "It shall be as I have said. You will meet with no punishment at our hands, but you must change your vain ways of thinking, and learn to live a lowly, submissive, and right-minded life."

In an agony of despair the King glanced round the hall, searching for a sign of recognition from his courtiers, as he had sought it among his soldiers in the guard-room. A few paces within stood his chamberlain, the marshal, and the grizzled captain of the guard, and many another well-known lord. But, like the Queen,

who hung on every word and movement of the King's personator, they had turned away, indifferent as to the fate of the poor prisoner, and wholly engaged in attending on the occupant of the throne. Yes; and as the sergeants prepared to lead their charge from the hall, Jovinian's staghound, his faithful follower in the hunt, rose with an angry growl from beneath the steps, and would have hurled himself upon his old master had not the soldiers beat him back.

“A fair-weather friend like the others!” sighed the King. “Even my dog must fawn upon the pretender and show its teeth to its fallen lord!”

Dazed with his rebuff at the palace, Jovinian hardly noticed whither he was led. He passed down the familiar streets, which had seen him of old returning in triumph from victorious battle. Through his mind flashed a picture of these bygone scenes—the glittering lines of mail-clad warriors, the gay balconies crowded with welcoming faces, the square grey steeples from which rang out glad peals in honour of the hero of the hour, King Jovinian, proud, complacent, and invincible; to-day an abject outcast, friendless, homeless, and despised by the very beggars in the street. Oh! why had Fortune turned against her favourite?

Outside the city gates the sergeants halted.

“Our orders were to bring you beyond the boundaries of the town, and there to set you free; nor must you be seen in the city until you have come to your right mind again.”

Turned adrift in this way, Jovinian wandered on by himself as aimlessly as he had done the evening before. He had travelled some four or five miles, along quiet lanes hedged with sweet-scented bushes, when he came to a rippling brook, and by its side a rude clay hut. At once he recognised the place, and saw that unconsciously he had turned his steps in a direction they had often taken when he was a young and diffident ruler. In those days he used to come for counsel and confession to the hermit who made this cottage his humble retreat; in after years, as his self-sufficiency and pride developed, his visits became less frequent, and of late they entirely ceased.

“Will the hermit know who I am?” he wondered. Resolving to put it to the test, the King knocked at the door of his cottage.

“Hail! friend,” said a kind voice within the doorway; “tell me what brings you here?”

“Father,” replied Jovinian faintly, “look on me, and you will see one who has often visited you before. I am Jovinian, the king.”

“Nay; I cannot listen to lying words, such as a madman would utter. My counsel is only for

the humble-minded and penitent; no jester shall come beneath my roof." And so saying, the hermit closed the door.

Then suddenly a change came over the King. He fell upon his knees, and the tears poured down his cheeks, while he cried aloud :

"O God, that I should be abandoned by all men! Why am I punished thus? It is for my foolish pride that Heaven has brought me so low. In this hermit's cell I was wont to confess my faults in bygone times, and now what long years have passed since last I asked forgiveness here! It was but yesterday I thought that nothing—not even Death itself—could overthrow me. To-day I see my weakness and all my vanity. Heaven help me! how little I have in myself to be proud of!"

His grief prevented Jovinian from seeing that the hermit had stolen out to him as he was kneeling on the threshold. A soft touch on his shoulder made him start.

"My noble master, my loved son," said the old man, "how come you here—and why should you be in such distress?"

Joy, overpowering joy, took the place of grief in the King's heart, and his eyes shone with new gladness.

"Heaven has humbled me because of my sinful pride. Stripped of my kingship, I can get neither

wife, lords nor servants to own me. Even now, when I came to your hut, you yourself, Father, did not know me. But since you have come again to call me by my name, I take it as a sign of Heaven's pardon, and believe that I may yet be restored to my throne. Father, will you hear my confession, and absolve me?"

"Enter the cell, my son," answered the other; "your troubles are near an end. I will shrive you gladly, provide you with all that my hut affords, and set you on your way to regain your royal state."

The hermit did as he had said. He heard the King's confession, granted him absolution, and when his holy offices were discharged, he hastened to bring his royal guest the plain fare that he had at hand. His gentle counsel fell on attentive ears, and when at last he told the King that it was time he should retrace his steps to the palace, Jovinian rose comforted and strengthened to greater endurance.

"I shall seek my kingdom, dressed in your rough raiment, Father, and mounted on your ass. It shall be a token of the humility in which you have wrapped my soul." And with cheerful face the King rode off at eventide towards the town.

In passing the city gates he saw one of the warders, who stood by the entrance, sign to his

fellow through the dusk, and heard him whisper :
“The King! But no salute! He left orders that if he rode in disguise through the town to-night we should not do him reverence.”

This chance whisper eased Jovinian's anxiety, and still more, did he rejoice as he made his way to the palace, to see many of his people glance respectfully at his monk-like figure. Though, like the warders, they refrained from a salute, it was clear that they had recognised their master. In the palace, however, there was no constraint laid upon the servants ; each man he met bowed humbly before the King. The old order prevailed again ; and never had his subjects' homage seemed so pleasing to Jovinian as this summer evening, after he had been deprived of their respect for more than a whole day.

A squire came up to deliver a message that the Queen was awaiting her lord, as he had requested, in the Little Hall.

“Heaven aids me in my return,” said the King to himself ; “and if it is God's will, the stranger who wore my crown this morning will also acknowledge my rights, and yield me the throne.”

He entered the Little Hall ; and there he found his queen fast asleep, her silk-threaded needle in her hand, and a piece of broidery fallen from her lap to the floor.

By her side stood he who had played the King's part that day. He appeared the perfect image of Jovinian in his royal dress, but just as the King was stepping forward to accost him sternly, a change passed over him, and he appeared no longer human. His face shone brightly; white robes, rich with embroidered wreaths of flowers, fell down to his feet, and from his shoulders sprang two wings of lovely and varying hues.

"Shrink not before me," were the words the King heard. "Often ere now have I hovered by thy side, though thou knewest it not. Thy place I have taken for a day, that thou mightest learn how feeble is thy power, how small a thing the sovereignty thou boastedst. Thou hast seen now that in a moment God can lay low the proudest monarch on earth. And yet thou thoughtest thyself too strong to be moved even by death!

"Thy lesson is over; thank Heaven that a few hours' distress has taught thee wisdom for the rest of thy happy reign. Save the holy hermit, no one knows of thy punishment, but all will see thy new gentleness in future, and will bless thy changed nature."

The great outspread wings trembled for an instant before Jovinian's dazed eyes, then with a parting gleam of rainbow colours they bore away the guardian angel.

The King stood still, musing over the strange events of the two last days, until the Queen, awakening from her deep sleep, rose with a smile to greet him, and inquire if he would not throw off his disguise and meet his lords at the banquet. And so it came about that at the close of day Jovinian found himself clothed once again in his royal dress and throned amongst his nobles. He had no need to dread the gossip of the court about the "mad creature" who that morning had declared himself king: the matter was so trifling that it was already forgotten. None of his suite could have believed that they had not had their master in their midst since they returned from the hunt, and save perhaps that he was gentler in manner there was nothing outwardly to mark a difference in the King. Yet to Jovinian himself it seemed that he was another man from the haughty ruler of two days ago, so fervently he now hated the pride which he had then harboured in his heart.

For many long years he lived to make his kingdom a pleasanter home for his people; and, that the country might not suffer again from a sovereign's arrogance, shortly before he came to die he called a clerk to take down in writing the story of his punishment to serve as a warning to future kings.

"The good hermit who alone knew of what

befell me that summer's day has long been dead, and the secret of my repentance will die with me unless it is now heard from my lips. Then take up your pen, my scribe, and write me the tale of the misery through which I learned the grace of true humility."

IV.—Ogier the Dane

WHAT nobler vassal had good Charlemaine than Ogier, mightiest of the Danes, and most chivalrous of all knights? For many a generation after he had passed away, minstrels sang of his exploits: how, given as a hostage to the Frankish Emperor, in time he came to bear the Oriflamme against the paynims, fought hand-to-hand with Caraheu, and had slain base Charlot, had not Heaven bade him stay his hand. Denmark was his; he wore the crown of Britain; he stormed the great town of Babylon, waged war in Palestine for the Holy Cross, and ruled in Tyre.

The record of these deeds is a gallant tale, but more wondrous is the story Nicholas the Breton once related of Ogier. He spoke of how Morgan le Fay bore the hero to Avallon, when all his wars seemed ended, and of what came to pass thereafter.

Hearken, and judge of the marvel for yourselves.

The chill air that breathes just before day-break crept in at the half-opened casements

of a room where Death held sway. The fair young Queen of Denmark lay dead ; around her head flickered the hallowed tapers that the watchers kept ever burning. The King, grieving sore for his dear wife, had knelt all night long by her bedside in an agony of voiceless despair ; while at the far end of the chamber, the nurses bent over the cradle of the new-born prince, from time to time whispering to one another memories of the grace and kindness of their late mistress.

One of the women had crossed the floor on tiptoe to replace a taper that had burned low in its socket. Her hand was resting on the candle when a sudden tremor passed through her limbs, her eyelids drooped, and she lost all consciousness in a trance that was deep as the Queen's sleep of death. What befell the one nurse befell the others at the same moment. The King also came under the spell ; his wan, drawn face relaxed, his eyes closed, and the desolate mourner forgot his woes for a little while in this strange, heavy sleep.

But now the deathlike stillness was broken by the sound of light footsteps on the staircase, muffled in the sweep of long silken robes. Noiselessly the door of the bed-chamber swung open, admitting a breath of sweet odour, more fragrant than the scent which was rising to the windows from rose and lily in the gardens below.

In the doorway stood a group of fay ladies like a cluster of bright flowers in sunshine. Crowned they were, each with a circlet of gems, and their loose-flowing raiment shone with heavenly hues that seemed to light up the spot where they stood.

One by one they stepped daintily across the room to the infant's cradle, there to whisper over the little Prince of Denmark the promise of a fairy gift. The first to hail him was Gloriande, and the gift she bestowed was courage and steadfastness. "Thou shalt be a true knight," she whispered; "thine honour shall be stainless; and in upholding the right, thou shalt be alike fearless and unwearied."

The second fay advanced, a glorious vision of brightness, her head crowned with blood-red rubies, and a tunic of golden mail upon her breast. "War and strife I promise thee," she said sternly; "throughout thy long life, warfare unending, that so thou mayst win martial fame amongst men, and gain Heaven's blessing by conflict with the paynim."

These words were barely uttered when another of the group raised her voice, and smilingly took up the war-maiden's rede. "To that I add a little gift to sweeten thy labour. I give thee victory in every struggle. Whoso thy foe, thou shalt ever be conqueror."

The fourth followed with the gift of courtesy and gentle speech. Then came a grey-eyed fay, with parted lips and a rosy blush overspreading her cheek as she promised the Prince the love of fair women and the power of winning their hearts.

The last to glide to the boy's cradle was the most lovely of the band. She stood a while gazing down on him, then tenderly she whispered: "Ogier, the gift I give thee is mine own love. Not while thou art in the heat of strife, but at the close of thy warfare, thou shalt see me and rejoice in my gift. Till then, Ogier my love, farewell."

Then, softly as they had come, the fairy visitants stole from the palace to the shore, where the waves were breaking in silver ripples on the sand. A moment they paused in silence, their faces turned towards the west; a moment later and they had vanished, leaving the still slumbering palace unwitting of their visit to little Ogier's cradle.

Now as to Ogier's long and honourable life, we must pass it over, strange though that appear when Ogier himself is our hero!

He was, as the world knows, a generous knight, unsurpassed in valour, upright, and greatly beloved by his people. The heathen

hordes dreaded to meet him in battle ; the evil-doer shuddered beneath his glance. In warfare and in the ruling of his lands he was ever happy ; but through the love he bore wife and child, grief no less than joy, fell to his lot. He early lost Bellisande, his sweet wife, and his only child, Baldwin, a winsome bright-eyed lad of great promise, was put to death by the evil-minded Charlot. But even these sorrows did not quench his spirit ; bravely he toiled on to a ripe old age, and to the end of his days, Ogier was ever the same stout-hearted warrior.

In the cloudless western sky the sun is sinking softly below the horizon, but over in the east there is an angry look on heaven's face. Great masses of steel-grey cloud, stained red round the edges by the glow of sunset, are lowering above an ocean of tossing waves that change in colour from a glittering silver to green, grey, and sombre black. No wind ruffles the sea this evening, yet the billows, like a great army in rout, are tumbling and surging wildly as though they would dash down the barrier of bare brown rock which rises sharply in their path. This rugged island is the fatal Loadstone Rock, shunned in holy terror by every seaman. On winter nights, when snugly seated by the fireside, the old sailors may tell

the strange rumours they have heard of the Rock, but he who nears it, will never return home to tell his own tale. The ship that tries to pass, is drawn to destruction against its magnetic cliffs, and the crew, if not sucked beneath the waters, die ere long of starvation upon its barren heights.

To-night there is a living man upon the Rock. The sun sets upon the wreckage and bleached bones around him, and while the moon rises to throw her cold white light upon the scene, the lonely figure sits undismayed, awaiting sure death. He is an old man, nobly built; his hair is white, his face furrowed by age, but yet his kingly robes—now tarnished by the salt waves—are borne on shoulders quite erect, and his voice is still fresh and vigorous as he speaks his thoughts.

“For a man of my many years, my strength has stood me well. ’Tis seven weeks since our boat was cast on this rock, five days since the last of the crew died with our last crumb of bread between his lips, and still I am alive. If God had not willed me to die here, I had had strength enough to end my days, sword in hand, upon the field of battle. How glorious to have drawn my last breath beneath the banner that waved our challenge to the paynim foe!

“Thou must find thee another leader, Charlemaigne, to take my place and drive back these heathen bands from the fair land of France, for never more shalt thou see me take the field. Ah, never didst thou guess that Ogier’s bones would rest upon a lonely sea-girt rock! And yet this death, so different from what he hoped to meet, grieves not thine ancient knight now that he sees it close at hand.” And Ogier knelt down to thank God in simple words for thus ordering his end.

As night darkened, he fell into a deep slumber, from which he awoke before dawn; but the darkness that still overhung land and sea was suddenly dispelled by an unlooked for light which broke upon his eyes ere he had been long awake, and which steadily increased in ruddy brightness, while at the same time his ears caught the sound of sweet music.

“This is the dawning,” he murmured, “not of an earthly day, but of eternity. Death steals upon me; how pleasant, how gentle its approach!”

Just then he fancied his name was whispered through the air. Taking it to be a summons, he rose and crossed the island towards the east, whence the voice seemed to have come, and from where the light was still streaming.

The music had ceased, and the rays were

already growing somewhat dim, yet across the sea, as he raised his eyes eagerly to the east, he could descry a shining palace of gold in the midst of green lawns and shady groves of trees! But even as he gazed upon the scene, the light faded, the palace was lost in the darkness, and sea and sky became alike grey as the night around.

Imagining that the vision and the semblance of music had arisen from his own worldly thoughts, he sat down to turn his mind resolutely towards graver concerns; but the pulse of life beat stronger and stronger in his veins, and after trying for some time to centre his thoughts on approaching death, he gave up the effort, and started instead to climb down the rocky eastern side of his prison, whither he felt drawn in search of further revelations.

It was no easy task to swing himself from ledge to ledge, hanging, sometimes by one hand alone, above the sea which foamed far below. In time, however, he safely reached the base of the rock, where the only foothold was upon the wrecks, which the angry billows dashed ceaselessly to and fro against the fatal magnet cliffs. From one piece of floating timber to another, he leaped out towards the east, until he reached the outermost wreck, where, steadying himself against the rush of the sea and the blinding

dash of spray, he stood with his good sword Courtain in his grasp, expectant only of death.

At that moment he heard again a strain of music floating through the air, and a bright speck of light appeared moving on the ocean towards him, rapidly growing in size until he saw it was a gilded boat. His first thought, that this was another wreck to be added to those already drawn to the Rock, was soon disproved, for although unguided by human hand, it steered its course unerringly through the troubled seas and drew up safely by the wreck where Ogier was standing. Believing that, whatever its course, it was intended to bear him from the island, he sheathed his sword Courtain, and stepped into the skiff. There was neither oar nor rudder in the little boat, but oarsman and helmsman were not wanted, for no sooner had the old knight seated himself amongst the cushions in the stern than the skiff shot lightly from the Rock; and he, giving way to overpowering sleep, knew nothing more of his passage.

When he awoke it was to find the boat lying moored in a shaded nook at the edge of a quiet stretch of water. He sprang ashore and, half-alarmed by the rare beauty of the place, drew his sword and murmured a holy prayer; yet as he went forward a step or two, his fears that it

might be an unhallowed spot vanished, and he fancied he had come to Paradise. The meadows bore a wealth of gay flowers, the air was soft and birds sang sweetly from blossom-laden trees. The loveliness of the scene, however, was presently dulled to his senses by a new feeling of feebleness. His limbs grew stiff, each step was taken with greater difficulty; his eyes were dim and even his memory was failing, for he could not recall whence he had come, or aught of his past life. His growing weakness he took calmly. It was the hand of death upon him, he supposed, and he was well content to have it so, since he was already in Paradise. Slowly he wandered down a green alley until he reached a wicket-gate opening on the fairest of gardens; then, turning fainter, he staggered to a fountain over which two white-thorns shed their blossoms, while close by sounded the minstrelsy that he had heard faintly on the isle. Here he sank down unconscious, and all his thoughts melted to heavenly dreams. Through these dreams came the murmur of a sweet voice: "Ogier, Ogier, how long thou hast been in coming!"

Fancying himself in heaven, he strove to answer as though he were addressed by his great Master.

"Nay, nay," said the voice, "not yet art thou

in Paradise, Ogier. Long may it be ere thou goest on that last journey, now that thou hast reached me, mine own love! Ah! at length the happy day has come when I may give thee again the beauty and freshness of youth, and fit thee to enjoy the love thou didst gain from me even in thy cradle, long years ago."

Life seemed ebbing fast from him as he struggled to shake off the feeling of someone touching his forehead and calling him sweet names. Was it in the shade of his young wife (her very name now lost to him) who, years past, had gone to her rest beneath the hawthorns of God's-acre in old St Omer? Was this a troubled dream of things past that haunted him in the shadow of death?

No, it was not so. Once again he swooned, but ere consciousness left him, he felt the soft pressure of a living hand and knew that a ring had been slipped upon his finger.

His eyes opened on the same scene—with what a difference! No longer was his body weak or his mind frail as an old man's. The strength of youth was within him; he was entering on a new life.

At the first glance he thought the garden unchanged, but, as he looked around him a second time, he saw that it now held in its

midst a lady whose marvellous beauty enhanced ten times the charm of the scene. So young she seemed that he would have thought her a maiden in her teens, but that her glorious eyes were filled with the wisdom of more than a mortal lifetime. Her raiment matched her loveliness. The finest cloudy veilings fell to her sandals where jewels gleamed against her snowy feet; a ruby shone like a star upon her breast, and her golden locks were wreathed with sweetest rosebuds.

Ogier had sprung to his feet, and as she moved towards him, her eyes seeking his, and her arms outstretched in welcome, he faltered out a question as to where he stood, and in whose presence.

The fair one answered: "Thou hast come to Avallon to dwell with me, Morgan le Fay, whose love was pledged to thee whilst thou wast yet an infant in the Danish palace." She told of how she had visited his cradle with her sister fays those many years ago. "Yet am I young as then, for our youth is eternal; and now that thou art in Avallon, thou shalt be young and changeless too. See, I shall show thee the charm by which thou hast been restored to the strength of early manhood."

She pointed, as she spoke, to a heavy gold ring with curious figures traced upon it, which

now encircled one of Ogier's fingers, and told how, when she had placed it there a little while ago, the marks of old age had straightway vanished from his form. "So long as thou wearest it," she said, "death will not touch thee."

At first, overcome by the fay's beauty, he had been enraptured with his new surroundings, but soon a great longing for his old life of warfare upon earth swept over him, and he felt that all before him was dreamlike, dreary and unreal. Morgan read his thoughts, and with a smile linked her hand in his, and drew him towards the castle beyond her gay gardens. "Come, love," she whispered, "our life is fairer than that earthly one for which thou mournest. Thou wilt be happy, aye, radiantly happy, when thou hast forgotten thy stormy past. Bethink thee how thou wouldst even now have been dead, had not I slipped the ring upon thy finger and so kept life within thee. Wilt thou not give me thy love in return for mine already given?"

Across the daisied grass they had passed to a doorway in the castle, round which clustered a group of fair maids singing joyous welcome to Ogier and strewing flowers upon the way. Through long, cool corridors they came at length to a throne placed at the end of a hall, and

there, when Morgan had led the hero up the steps, a young girl advanced from the band, and laid at his feet a golden crown. This Morgan placed upon his head, bidding him, in gentle words, forget the world and rise to enjoy the new life in Avallon. At the magic touch of the Crown of Forgetfulness his last regrets vanished; the past was blotted out, and all he knew was that he had now a share in the joys of a wondrous glad and peaceful country. No trouble henceforth met him in Avallon, where base or mischief-making men were unknown; only the noble-hearted (whom men thought dead) were borne like Ogier from earthly seas to these pain-forgetting shores, where all was happiness and content.

A hundred years had passed since the aged Ogier had last been seen upon earth. In those hundred years many a change had befallen the lands in which he had dwelt, and in France, unhappily, these changes had all been for the worse. A cruel, lingering war oppressed her sorely; the heathen foe once more overran the land, besieging cities and laying waste the fertile country.

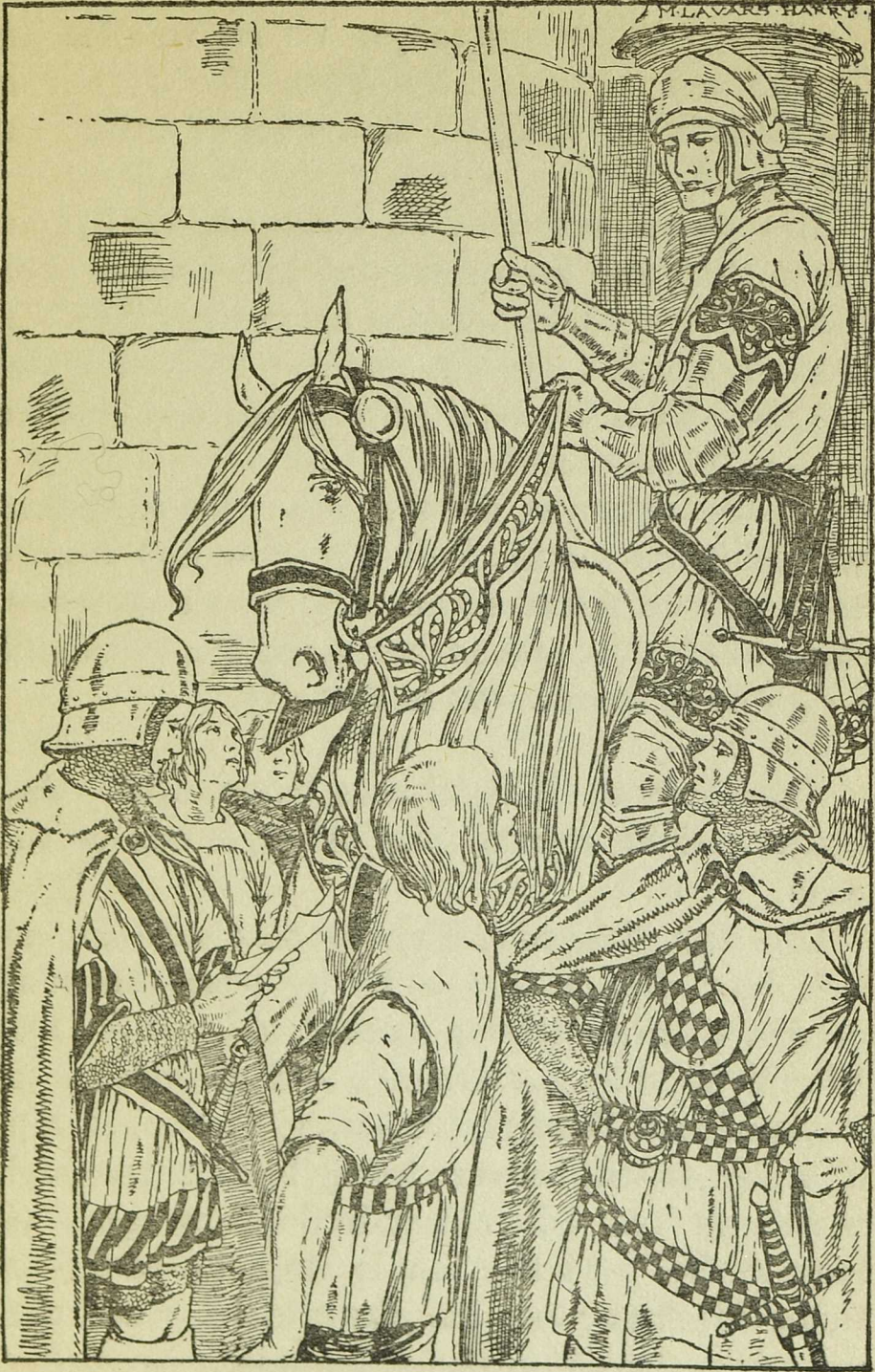
At the gates of Paris, one spring day, stood crowds of anxious folk pressing round each horseman who rode up to the city walls, and

questioning him eagerly of the progress of the foe. Was Harfleur still safe? Did Andelys stand in need of help? And was it true that the Pont de l'Arche had been burnt down? To these and suchlike questions each newcomer gave a different answer, and the crowd turned from him impatiently to waylay the traveller.

Towards sundown a party of three rode up to the gates. Two serving-men followed their master, their eyes fixed on him with doubt and awe, as though striving to determine in what way he differed from other men. He was apparently quite young, for though his face was bronzed, it was still fresh and unfurrowed; his bright golden hair and grey eyes were as a boy's, and the look on his face was radiant as an angel's. In height he far surpassed the men around him, his giant-like form rendering more conspicuous the old-fashioned dress and armour which he wore.

The warders examined his pass, and asked his name and from what city he came. The Ancient Knight, he replied, was the name people gave him in St Omer, the town he had just left. Then, heedless of the questions showered on him, as on all the other wayfarers, he stared pityingly at the sergeants before him.

"Saint Mary!" said he, "if that is all the



"THE WARDERS EXAMINED HIS PASS"

stature ye reach nowadays, 'tis no wonder the pagans are victorious! When the Hammer-bearer took the field, his men were of a different pattern!"

His words savoured so strangely of bygone times that the group around him ceased their talk, and gazed in wonder at the speaker. A mocking laugh broke the silence. "Charlemaine has risen from the tomb to save our city!" cried a voice in the crowd.

At the name of Charlemaine the horseman started in his saddle, knit his brow and seemed as though he would speak. No words, however, came to his lips, and gathering up the reins with a sigh he rode onwards to the city.

The Ancient Knight was none other than Ogier, and his return from Avallon was on this wise.

One day Morgan le Fay approached him, and told how France was suffering from the onset of fierce tribes whom none could drive back. Would he don his armour and champion the cause of that Christian country, she asked him, if, under a spell, he were borne back to the world which he had left a hundred years ago? So long as he wore the magic ring, he could not suffer death nor lose his youthfulness; and once the pagans were subdued, he would be wafted,

as before, to Avallon, his fame immeasurably increased by this new exploit.

To Morgan's proposal Ogier gave willing assent. Beneath her potent spell he fell into a trance during which the mysterious voyage was accomplished, and he awakened to find himself on the Flemish coast; thence journeying to St Omer, the town he knew so well in the old days, he had ridden through the desolated country to join the forces that were mustering in Paris.

His antique dress and old-world talk had roused as much wonder in the country roads as at the gates of Paris, though the simple peasants were less apt to mock at his appearance than were the quick-witted townsmen. But if the French folk thought it strange to see a man of his stamp in their midst, it was stranger for Ogier himself to visit old haunts peopled with a new generation. The memory of Avallon had grown dim, and all his thoughts were given to the world in which he moved again.

Now, the King of France lay besieged by the enemy at Rouen, in dire need of help from his capital. When Ogier entered Paris he learned that the Queen was holding a muster of troops in the square before her palace, and that many knights had gathered to swear fealty, and march, at her orders, to relieve Rouen. Accordingly he made his way to the palace, joined the crowd of

soldiers, and awaited his turn to approach the Queen, who, beneath a royal canopy in the open square, was receiving the oaths of fealty from eager lips.

At length his turn came, and he knelt before a handsome woman, tall and dark-haired, whose eyes lit up with surprise and approval as she saw his striking carriage. His homage was paid in the courtly style of a past century. Then as he rose, the Queen inquired his name and from what country he had come. Once again he replied that men called him the Ancient Knight; as to his home, it was so long since he had left it, to take up his abode in a far country, that he had no recollection of it whatever. That answer made the Queen the more curious to discover the mystery of this old-world young knight, but as there was then no leisure for talk, she bade a page conduct him to the palace, where he should have refreshment, and await her coming. She wished, said she, to appoint him to some command, and to give him his orders that same day.

So Ogier followed the page through a postern gate by which he had often entered the palace in Charlemaine's time. The coat-of-arms above the doorway, which he well remembered looking fresh and gay in those days, was now so faded and weather-stained that the young page paused

to point it out to the stranger as a quaint and interesting relic of the past! No wonder Ogier felt as though he were in a dream, and would presently awaken to find himself among the familiar faces of his early days, or perchance alone on the fatal Loadstone Rock!

After a light meal in the hall, he wandered out of doors to the gardens, past merry groups of squires and gay ladies, until, finding a quiet spot beyond the sound of play and laughter, he lay down to rest, and soon lost himself in dreams.

Still slumbering, he was found by the Queen, who, having dispatched her affairs of state in the public square, came through the gardens, accompanied by an elderly dame of honour. Her eyes wandered admiringly over his outstretched form, and with a smile she remarked that the name given to him was ill-suited to such a handsome young knight.

“Ah, my lady,” said the dame, shaking her head distrustfully, “I fear there is some dark mystery about him. The squire who took him to the palace says he kept questioning him of men who have been dead these fifty years or more. And look how old a fashion he shows in his armour! God grant he is not a spirit of evil come to lead us into greater trouble! That ring, engraven with strange figures, is doubtful sign of his good faith.” And even as the Queen

was striving to reassure her, the old dame stooped down, and deftly slipped the ring off his finger.

Instantly his golden hair changed to white, his face grew wrinkled, and, amidst other marks of old age, his breathing became hard and gasping. His eyes half opened, but his lips were too feeble to frame words; he could only move one hand slightly, as if groping for the lost ring.

The Queen grew pale with terror when she saw this change pass over the young and handsome knight. The tears coursed down her cheeks, for she could not endure to see him growing grey and cold, as if the hand of death were already on his heart. Her old attendant, on the contrary, showed neither dismay nor pity. She handed the ring to her mistress, saying that it was indeed a treasure, since the wearer of it would ever remain young. But the Queen would not keep it, tempting prize though it was. To the indignation of the cruel old dame, she knelt over the knight, and whispering, "Ah, wilt not thou think kindly of me if I restore thee this magic ring?" she hastily thrust it upon his finger, in the hope that it might yet be in time to save his life.

As quickly as strength had ebbed, so fast did it flow back to Ogier. In a moment he sprang to his feet, fresh, youthful, and handsome as before, looking around him with dazed eyes,

that showed he had newly awakened from dreams and did not understand the reason of the Queen's pallor and her troubled looks. She, hiding her anxiety, smiled, and chided him playfully for sleeping whilst other men were fighting for the cause of France.

"Nay, Queen," said he; "I would far sooner meet thy foemen than be confronted with such dreams of old age and misery as have come to me in my sleep this afternoon."

With a sudden blush that made her look the lovelier in Ogier's eyes, she cried: "Ah, if dreams beset such a mighty man as thou, then it is pardonable that they also visit a frail woman like me! 'Twas but last night I dreamed that enthroned before our people sat a king of France whose face was strange to me; to-day I know it to have been thine."

From the way in which the Queen spoke, Ogier saw that she thought him worthy of every honour, and he, in return, felt deeply grateful for her trust, and longed to prove that it was well placed in him.

Together they walked to the council-room, leaving behind them the dame of honour, who was muttering her disgust at the turn events had taken, and vowing that if ever she had the chance of regaining the ring, she would not again part with it so easily.

Ogier had not long to wait an opportunity of serving in the field. In the council-room he gave such wise advice, and showed so extraordinary a knowledge of warfare, that he was forthwith appointed to the command of one wing of the newly raised army, which was about to march from Paris to the aid of the King at Rouen.

A proud man was Ogier as he rode forth at the head of his troops next morning, his heart fired with the joy of coming battle and love of the fair Queen, who from her window, watched the passing army, and dropped a wreath of sweet-scented flowers at her champion's feet.

When the army reached Rouen it was met by the news that the King lay slain by an arrow, and that the town and surrounding country were in the hands of the heathen foe. It was not long before Ogier changed the fortunes of the war. He speedily fell upon the enemy, and completely routing them in a great battle, he avenged the King's death and recaptured the city. Then, on his victorious return to Paris, he was welcomed as the saviour of France, and the people, who had now to elect a new monarch, declared, one and all, that the Ancient Knight must succeed to the throne, for he had proved himself to be a leader amongst men. For a year he continued to wage war upon the heathen invaders, driving them before him until not one

remained within the kingdom of France. So great was his delight in once more being on the field of battle, and so deep his devotion to the Queen, who, after a short widowhood, had now promised to bestow her hand upon him, that amid the pleasures of his new life, Avallon, with its peaceful, uneventful days, faded utterly from his memory.

In due course, when May was again gladdening the land, preparations were made for the coronation of King Charles (the name by which Ogier was known in his new kingdom), and for his marriage, on the same day, with the widowed Queen. Full of joyful thoughts he awoke in the early dawn of that great day. So early it was that the sparrows had scarce begun to twitter in the eaves, and at first the only sound that was heard in his bedchamber was the distant hammering of the woodwrights, who had been busy overnight completing the stagings for the morning's pageant.

Presently, however, a voice rang in his ears: "Ogier! Ogier!" Now, our hero had lost all memory, not only of Avallon, but also of his former days on earth when he was known as Ogier the Dane. The name was strange to him, therefore, and, rising on his elbow, he cried: "Who is here? Why seek ye an Ogier in this room?"

There came a sigh in answer to his questions. "Ogier was once a mighty knight," said the gentle voice, "and many were his gallant deeds when Charlemaine ruled in this land." Then the astonished listener heard the story of his own wonderful prowess and the conquests he had once made. "The Ogier of whom I tell, is none other than thou who to-day callest thyself Charles of France; last year the Ancient Knight was thy title. Ah, Ogier, mine own love, hast thou forgotten that thou camest here only on a short sojourn from the happy land of Avallon? Return, I pray thee; the heathen are swept from France, and thy task is finished. If thou didst linger here, no more fame couldst thou win, and the unending youth that my ring provides for thee, would rouse ill talk amongst mortals. Come, love, take from me the crown which dispels all thought of earthly life, and which will once more bring thee perfect bliss. Dost thou still look on me strangely? Nay, Ogier, this is no empty dream."

By his side stood Morgan le Fay, dazzlingly beautiful, holding in her outstretched hand the crown that had been placed on his head when first he entered the palace of Avallon. At her bidding he now rose as in a dream, put on the kingly robes that had once been Charlemaine's, and seated himself in the royal chair, wearing



“DRINKING IN THEIR LAST MEMORY OF THIS WORLD”

the golden crown, and holding in his right hand the sceptre of that great conqueror. Then the fairy Morgan drew near, raised the earthly crown from his head, and set in its place her circlet, which brought its wearer the blessed boon of forgetfulness. In a moment the memory of the past months was blotted out; the hero recalled the fair land of Avallon, and knew that it was no creation of his fancy that stood before him, but his own true love, who had come to lead him to those distant shores.

“Oh, love,” he faltered, “how came we here? Have I been separated from thee for a while? I dreamed, methinks, of having spent long months toiling and battling upon earth.”

Without waiting to answer, she took his hand in hers and drew him gently from the palace. On the threshold they paused, and turned their eyes upon the sleeping city, whose Queen would yet have to seek a new consort to share her throne. Beneath the rising sun the Seine shone like a great stream of molten gold, and very fair lay the misty town along its banks. A moment the pair stood drinking in their last memory of this world—then vanished, and mortals knew Ogier no more. But in far-distant Avallon, he and his fairy bride dwell together in bliss, untouched by age or by the shadow of death.

V.—The Land East of the Sun and West of the Moon

EAST of the sun, west of the moon !
All day long Gregory's fishing boat had been flitting hither and thither upon the broad Norwegian firch, so belike it was the memory of that long day's cruise that led him at night-time to dream of a country whose direction was so quaint and puzzling. And as the dream lingered in his mind next morning, and pleased him, idle though it was, he took pains to turn it into verses, which many a generation has listened to within the halls and cottages of Norway.

Here is the story which came to him in his dreams.

A well-to-do husbandman in a certain part of Norway farmed his own land with the help of his two elder sons. He had a third son, but this John, although a tall, strong lad, was of little use upon the farm. Many an hour he trifled away at the fireside in winter, and still more in the woods and orchard when summer came round. Whatever he might make of his

handsome face, his dreamy wits, the store of old rhymes and such other scraps of learning as were his, he would never prove a good farmer, said his father. "Let John go his own ways," the goodman would exclaim; "he is not worth training on my fields!"

One summer morning the farmer went to look at a meadow where he expected his rich crop of hay would soon be ready for the scythe, but, alas! a melancholy sight met his eyes when he looked across the wattled fence—a great patch of the meadow grass was trampled down, so that no mower could possibly pass his scythe through the tangle.

The farmer came home with a frown on his brow. "Thorolf," he cried to his eldest son, "to-night you must take your crossbow, and lie in watch amongst the hawthorns that skirt the south meadow. Some one has come by night and beaten down the ripening grass; whether it be an enemy of ours—who would have thought we had any!—or a mischievous vagrant, he shall be well punished if he plant foot within the meadow a second time!"

So Thorolf went out after supper to keep watch over the meadow, but what with his hard day's work, and a very comfortable meal at the close of it, he was not long in falling into a doze, and from that he passed into a deep

sleep that lasted well into the morning. When he arose from his bed of wood-sorrel he found that the long grass was trodden down in fresh places, and he was obliged to go home and own, to his father's chagrin, that matters were now worse than ever.

The next evening Thord, the second son, was sent in place of Thorolf, but when he returned to confess with downcast face that he had done no better than his elder brother, and that by this time there was only one corner of the meadow left untrodden, the farmer altogether lost his temper, and rated them both soundly, calling them good-for-nothing, slothful young fellows.

Hearing his brothers called names that were generally bestowed upon him alone, John, who was strolling past the group, stopped, and stretching himself lazily: "I am truly sorry you have not done your work better, my brothers," he said, with a pretence at reproach in his voice, "for now our good father will insist upon sending me out to take a turn at night watching. Well, well, father, you need vex no more; by this time to-morrow I shall have found out where the mischief comes from."

"You!" cried his father indignantly. "Do you think you can succeed where Thorolf and Thord have both failed? If you find out the

offender it will be the first time in your life, my boy, that you have shown yourself worth your keep. Go and try the post to-night, by all means, but I cannot say that I expect to learn more from you than from my other brave watchers."

Quite unmoved by his father's scoff, John went calmly on his way. He spent the day in sleep—a wise enough preparation for night work—and when the time came for him to go on watch, he went down to the meadow without bow or knife in his hand. "If I have to deal with a rough set of men, they would soon make an end of me should I draw bow upon them," thought he, "and still less use have I for weapons, if the trespassers prove, as methinks they will, to be gentle fairy-folk."

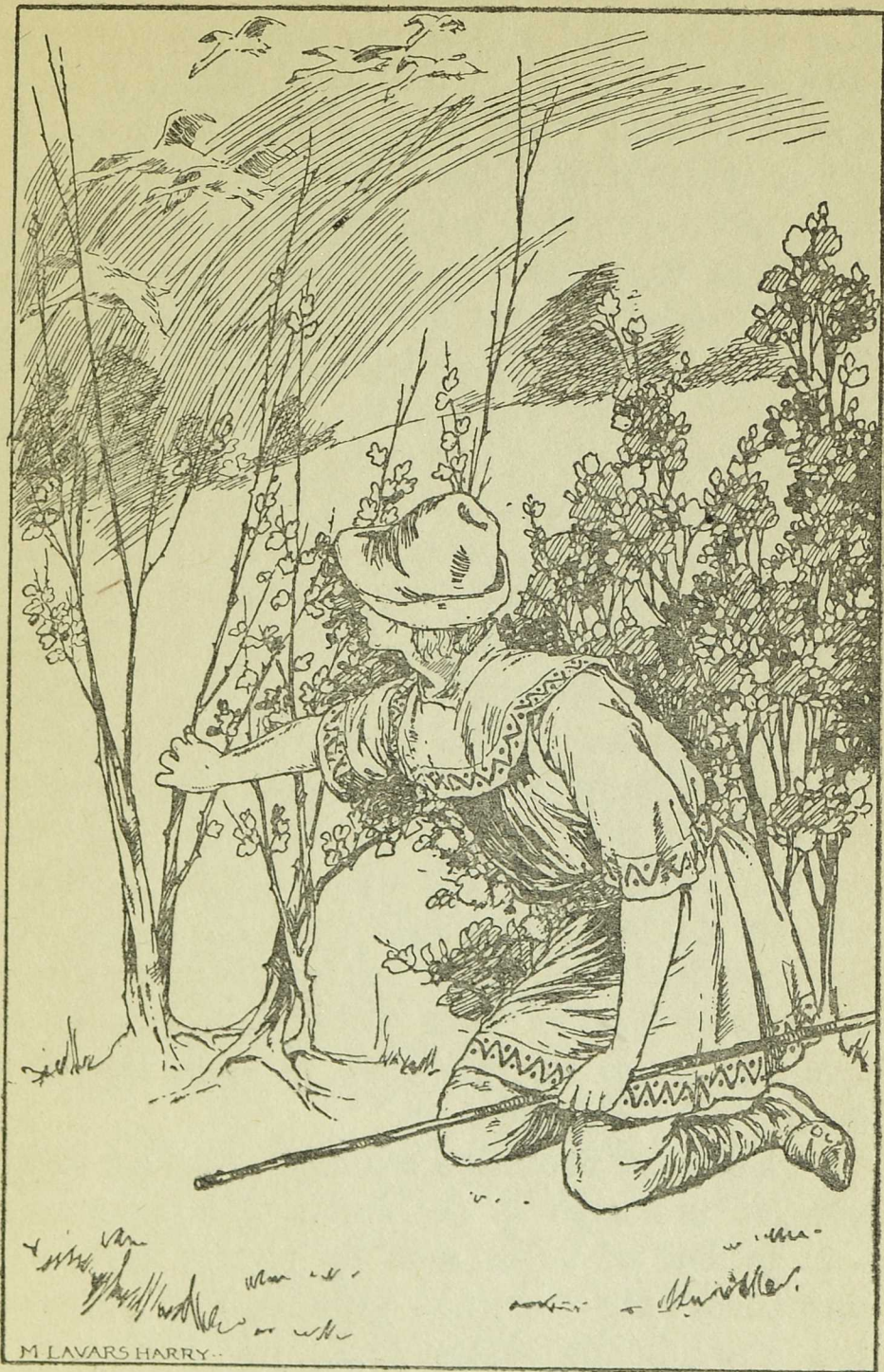
Amongst the hawthorn bushes he found a hiding-place close to the untrodden part of the hayfield. Hour after hour passed, and yet no visitant, either of earth or fairyland, set foot upon the meadow. The dawn broke, a light breeze stirred the long grass, and one by one the birds in the wood began to twitter shyly. Up to this time John had kept wide awake, but now drowsiness would have overpowered him had he not heard a strange, rushing sound of wings overhead, and, parting the boughs that screened his face, he watched breathlessly to see what manner of bird might alight. Slowly

seven white swans came circling towards the meadow, and dropped on the dewy grass only a stone's cast from where he lay crouching beneath the hawthorn. He was ready to raise a shout, and frighten them from the place, if need be; but so long as they did no harm to his father's crops, he took pleasure in watching them close beside him, bridling, and preening their snow-white feathers.

Satisfied that they were moving about on the edge of the field where there was nothing to spoil, he closed his eyes for a few moments. A sudden hush made him start, and he glanced round to see if the stately birds were still before him. No, they were not; but on the grass stood seven maidens, as fresh and lovely as the white feathers that they had cast down at their feet! One of them was standing with her face turned away from the hawthorn brake, so that John saw but the ripples of her golden hair, over which the morning breeze was playing lightly; yet as he hearkened to the sweet notes of her voice, his heart beat wildly, and he cried to himself that she was the fairest of the fays, and the queen of his heart now and for ever! And when at length she turned, and he eagerly scanned her features, one glance told him that he had judged aright by her voice, for indeed the sweetness of her face passed all imagining.

A while the seven sisters stood murmuring softly to one another, glad, it seemed, to indulge in talk when they regained their voices along with their human form; then, as if to enjoy all that they might, before they again put on their feathery dress, they danced lightly and merrily over the long, dewy grass, and laughed for joy as they frolicked carelessly in the farmer's dearly prized meadow. Not for worlds would the watcher amongst the hawthorns have disturbed them. Every smile, every word, and every movement of the swan-maiden whom he had singled out for his love, made his heart thrill with happiness. But ah! what would he do when she flew away with her sisters, and he was left to mourn, perchance never to see her again? The swan-skin which she had cast aside, lay within his reach. If he hid it from her, at least she would have to speak a word to him before she could recover it and soar away, thought he, and, yielding to the impulse, he stretched out his hand stealthily, and drew the skin into his nest beneath the thorn-trees.

The sun, that had shot its first level beams across the meadow when the maidens started upon their dance, now rising high in the heavens, warned them that it was no longer safe to linger where men might soon be passing to their day's work. In a long line they tripped back, one



"SEVEN WHITE SWANS CAME CIRCLING TOWARDS THE MEADOW"

after another, and slipped on their snow-white swan-skins; but when she upon whom John's eyes were bent, came to look for hers, a sharp cry of distress rang from her lips—the downy wrap was not to be found! In vain she searched for it, in vain her sisters flitted through the tangled grass, looking for what lay hidden securely in John's keeping beneath the hawthorn boughs. Every minute the sun beat more strongly upon wood and field, a stern reminder to the swan-maidens that fate forbade them to remain longer upon earth. The six fair white birds clustered round their poor sister, striving without avail to comfort her, and she, softly stroking their plumes with one hand in silent farewell, hid her tearful eyes with the other as they unwillingly prepared to take their flight. So long as they were with her, she tried to conceal her anguish, but when she heard them rise on the wing and soar away far above the meadow, her grief broke out wildly; her whole body was shaken with sobs, and the tears splashed down on the grass through the slim fingers that hid her face.

A sound of footsteps amongst rustling twigs startled her even in the midst of her distress, and in fear of being seen by mortal eyes, she fled across the trampled ground, and cowered low down in the beaten grass, like a wounded

bird that lies in terror of its destroyer. The eyes that met hers, however, were not such as could inspire fear; they were almost as startled and timid as her own. Moved by her grief, John had come to own, in shame, that he had stolen the swan-skin; and though at first the maiden had trembled at his coming, she saw now that he was looking tenderly upon her, and she divined that it was love for her, and a longing to keep her beside him, that had prompted his theft. "Ah! do you think," she cried passionately, "that because you have been cruel enough to hide my swan-skin, and keep me bound to earth, I can love you and live happily amongst mortal men?" Wisely she worked upon his feelings, begging him, since he did not wish to do her harm, to win her grateful thanks by letting her fly away safely. "You make it too hard for me to set you free, maiden," he answered; "every word from your lips, every glance from your bright eyes so enthralls me that I cannot bear to let you go."

"Alas!" she sobbed, "what can I do? I would fain listen to your love, but I must not dwell with mortals upon earth; it would be death alike to you and to me if you kept me beside you any longer. Will you not come with me, and share our life in our far-distant country? Nay, nay; it would be too much to ask you to

leave your home and your kinsfolk for my sake. Let me bid you farewell, then; be wise, and yield to fate; let me soar away in my swan-skin, and do you turn back and dwell contentedly in your own land, knowing that you have won my heart by your gentleness, your pity, and your love."

"Nay," said he eagerly; "I will not let you go alone. Take me with you, I pray, and let me live for ever in your far country, for worthless would I count my life on earth if I should never look again on your dear face."

So the swan-maiden, though she doubted the wisdom of his choice, suffered him to lead her to the shade of a neighbouring beech-wood, where, taking from him her white swan-skin, she made ready for their strange journey. First, she set a gold ring with a dark green stone upon his finger as a seal to their love; then, bidding him lie down on the withered leaves beneath a beech-tree, she laid a spell upon him, and immediately his eyes grew dim, and sleep stole over his senses.

A long, long time passed until at length his eyes opened upon a new world. His love stood beside him in a beautiful land, whose sunshine and flowers were as unmatched by what he had hitherto known, as was the girlish beauty of her upon whom the pink blossoms were now falling

from the trees. "My land and yours!" she cried, following his bewildered gaze with a smile.

"You look too grave, sweetheart; does it not please you well?" But the only reason why the earth-born stranger looked so grave was that he was striving to recall something of the gloom and trouble that overshadowed mortal life, so that he might the better gauge the joy of his new home, where all was unclouded peacefulness and bliss.

Three harvests had been gathered in his father's fields when John began to think wistfully of the life that had once been his in Norway. It was not that he was dissatisfied with the fairyland in which he dwelt, or that his love was growing cold towards the lady of his heart, but more and more he yearned to share again his brothers' lot and to see how things sped with them. He fancied that he showed no sign of uneasiness, however, so the swan-maiden's question surprised him when one morning she asked: "What burden lies heavy upon your spirit? Do you fear that I have hid from you the knowledge of coming trouble, and that our careless, happy years are soon to have an end? Yes; you are right. I have said nothing of what I foresaw, because so long as we could close our eyes to it, there was no call

to disturb our peaceful days, but now, alas! our parting is at hand."

John turned to her anxiously. "Parting!" said he. "Why should we part?"

Then the swan-maiden told him that fate willed he should return to his own country for a time, and that their future happiness depended solely upon whether he could keep the commands that must be laid upon him whilst he revisited his old home. "Let not a sigh for me escape your lips," she warned him solemnly, "for were you to call on me, I would have to appear beside you upon earth, and ill would it be for both of us if I were seen of mortals. Yet though you must not ask me to join you, I have power to call you back, should I need you sorely. Every evening you shall go to the meadow where you first saw me, wait there an hour, and if I would recall you, I will send a sign. Rest contented, nor strive to return until you are bidden of me, and above all, sweetheart, let no one know the story of our love." Then, telling him that he must not delay his departure, she led him to the spot where he had first awakened in her fairyland, and, bending over him with sad and tender farewell, she soon sang him to sleep beneath a mystic spell. He knew that he was being wafted farther and farther away from her, for her sweet voice, half

choked with sobs, grew fainter each moment, and before his eyes there flitted a countless number of forms, unlike what he had ever seen either on earth or in fairyland—birds of gorgeous plumage, giant trees that seemed like overgrown ferns, dim-eyed beasts, and unthought-of creatures that aped mankind. By and by he became unconscious, as on his former journey, and when he awakened he was lying in a thick wood, where he had spent many an hour bird-nesting in his boyhood. He was again in Norway!

How well he remembered every step that he took towards his father's house! When he reached open ground he saw the farm-roofs, studded with bright house-leeks, rising above a distant clump of trees, and at the same time he heard the horn summoning the field workers to dinner—a summons which they were not slow to answer, for every one was at table when John, a few minutes later, came up to the porch, his footsteps unnoticed amid the general clatter of tongues and dishes. He listened anxiously until he caught the sound of his father's voice, for he had feared that by this time the old man might be dead; but now, reassured by the cheerfulness that reigned in the homestead, he stepped forward briskly, took the horn from its peg beside the door, and wound it, as a stranger might, to announce his arrival.

The honest farm-folk stared in amazement when they saw upon the threshold a stranger whose dress was a mass of gold from head to foot. No one recognised John ; even his father thought he was a nobleman, and, rising up, he courteously invited him to rest in the hall and share their simple meal, if he were so inclined.

John thanked him, and, feeling that it was not a fit time at which to declare himself, he answered that he would be glad to rest with them a while, for he was a stranger in those parts, and, having had the mishap to lose his horse that morning, he had been forced to walk till he was foot-sore. Satisfied with the explanation, the good-man gave him a place at the head of the table, and treated him with the utmost honour ; but his mother, on the other hand, was less convinced by his story, and watched him narrowly, wondering why he should so strongly remind her of her youngest boy, whom, in spite of his waywardness, she had loved most tenderly, and whose sudden disappearance had caused her untold suffering.

Meanwhile John had been taking note of all who were at table. Father and mother, his two brothers Thorolf and Thord, and most of the old servants were still there. A few new faces there were, one of which he looked at with interest—by his younger brother's side sat a handsome

woman, whom he rightly guessed to be Thord's bride. For one glance that John gave this Thorgerd, she shyly returned two, for she was much charmed by the good looks and the pleasant manners of the stranger.

When dinner was over the men returned to their work in the fields ; but before they left, the master of the house begged his guest to rest in the farmhouse as long as he pleased, and John answered that he would be glad to stay a while. The women were sent to their tasks by their mistress, who gave her orders to her young daughter-in-law, Thorgerd, amongst the others. Unwillingly Thorgerd rose from the table, and, throwing a last glance towards John, left him and his mother alone in the hall. But not yet did the goodwife dare to ask this handsomely dressed stranger the question that was trembling on her lips. If he really were her son he would soon show it, she believed ; and instead of leading him to talk, she slipped out of the hall, and prepared to test him by a simple little device. She sent a maid to throw down an armful of clothes on the settle close to which the stranger was resting, and the maid having done so, John was again left alone in the hall. His eyes fell upon the bundle of clothes beside him, and he immediately recognised them to be a masquerader's quaint cloak and hood

which he had worn four years ago at a Yuletide gathering.

The whole scene came back to him : the snowy ground, the figures around him, and the song that they sang that evening :

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

He rose dreamily, threw off his gold-embroidered coat, and, wrapping himself in the spangled finery, he paced the floor singing verse after verse of the old carol. His mother stole back to the hall, and saw what she had expected—her own boy, recalled by the memories of a past night, breaking into songs of the countryside, and hugging the quaint cloak about him as he wandered up and down the room in his dreamy fashion as of old.

He ran towards her as he caught sight of her loving eyes fixed upon him. “Mother,” he cried, looking into the wistful face, and kissing her fondly, as he had done when he was but a boy, “mother, your ne’er-do-well has come back, and glad am I that I may yet be a joy to you. I have come to see you but for a time, for my new home is far distant, and ere long I must return to it. But if I give you news of how I have

fared these three years, tell me in return all that has come to pass amongst you in that time."

So mother and son sat and talked hand-in-hand until the others came in at nightfall, when John rose, and told them that he was indeed the lad who had disappeared three summers ago. Mindful of the warning given him by the swan-maiden, he told no one, not even his old mother, the true story of his fairy love, but spoke of how he had met people from a far country the morning that he had been on watch beside the south meadow, and how they had taken him with them, and, settling in their midst, he had fared surpassingly well, and was now wedded to a lovely princess.

There was great rejoicing amongst the simple folk when they learned that the handsome stranger was the idle young dreamer whose chances of fortune had seemed so slender in the past. His elder brothers welcomed him without the least touch of jealousy; while the goodman, for the first time in his life, felt proud of his youngest son, and his only regret was that John would have to quit Norway again, when the seamen who had brought him on this visit should return to take him back to his new home.

And now John had got his desire. He was free to enjoy life on his father's farm as of old; but just as he had wearied for the pleasure of

that rough life when he was shut off from it in the swan-maiden's country, so now that he was again upon earth, what would he not have given to see his love at his side? He began to grieve sadly, and the people in the homestead noticed that he came home more unhappy each evening from his solitary walk to the south meadow. They would fain have discovered why he took his nightly walk alone; but he did not encourage them to talk about his affairs, and, saving Thorgerd, no one ventured to question him. His sister-in-law, however, had fallen hopelessly in love with him, and she did everything in her power to win his heart and learn the secrets that lay buried there. She would slip out to join him on his way back from the meadow at nights, when he, love-lorn and despairing, sometimes wondered if he might not tell the story of his woe to this soft-eyed friend who was so anxious to listen to his talk and try to comfort him.

It was only by remembering how earnestly the swan-maiden had entreated him to keep the secret of her love from mortal ears, that he withstood his longing to unburden himself to Thorgerd. And yet, although he never willingly revealed the reason of his sadness, there came at length a night when rash words escaped him, and brought grievous trouble upon him and his beloved.

On Christmas Eve the snow lay thick upon the ground, and heavy grey clouds were resting on the hillsides, to be ever and again swept along by a biting cold wind that howled around the old farmhouse as John set out on his customary evening walk to the meadow. The chill and dreary look of the country was in keeping with his sense of misery, and in a sudden fit of despair he cried aloud when he reached the spot where he had first seen the swan-maiden: "Come to me, sweetheart! I cannot live without you. Come to me now!"

Would a fair white swan float down towards him from that cold, wind-swept mass of clouds? No; no answer came by sight or sound. A long time he waited breathlessly, trembling at his rashness in having called his beloved; but the sky grew darker and darker, night closed in, and at last he realised that it was useless to wait longer. Bitterly reproaching his love for having deceived him in saying that she would come at a sigh from him, he turned, and strode homeward. A slender woman wrapped in a grey cloak stood waiting him as he entered the courtyard; here, surely, was his swan-maiden! Not a word could he cry, for joy and surprise overmastered him. He saw her glide up to him, and felt her soft, warm hand slipped into his. Then he stammered, "Oh, sweetheart, I have

done no wrong, have I? I called on you because I could no longer endure life without you."

A gentle voice answered that in her eyes he could do no wrong, and that to know he loved her was the one desire of her heart. But when he recognised the speaker, John dropped her hand quickly, for it was not his swan-maiden, but Thorgerd, who had come to meet him. Forgetting that there was a listener beside him, he cried recklessly: "O my beloved, do you care for me no longer? Have I been indeed deceived? Yet think not that my love can fail like yours; while life lasts, never shall I cease to mourn for you!"

Thorgerd did not interrupt him. Silently she walked beside him across the snowy courtyard to the hall-door, then, stopping abruptly, she asked him in a smothered voice who it was that he had hoped to see that night—was it not she herself? She had loosened her grey cloak, and the light from the open door sparkled upon her golden hair and on the rich, embroidered robe which she wore in honour of the Christmas feast. A more beautiful woman could hardly have been found in all Norway; but John had not a thought to give her, and cared not though his words pained her deeply. He answered that the lady-love whom he longed to see was afar off. "Ah, if she would but cross this

threshold to-night!" he sighed despairingly; and as Thorgerd heard him, she turned away sullenly, knowing that there would never be a place for her in his heart, and wild with shame and anger that she had vainly betrayed to him the secret of her love.

The great Yule-tide feast was being celebrated in the hall, and every one belonging to the homestead was there, John and Thorgerd among the rest; she, trying to bury her chagrin in forced merriment, he, weary at heart, still thinking of his lost love. It was late in the evening before he could rouse himself to join in the revelry around the table; but at length he made the effort to bear his part, and, rising to his feet, he was about to call some well-known toast, when a horn rang out clear, though far away across the fields, and at the sound of the blast the words died upon his lips. Again the horn was wound, this time louder than before, and John grew pale and trembled at the thought of what it might betoken. When for the third time the blast was heard, now close at hand, he could neither speak nor move, and the other men snatched up their weapons, not knowing what enemy might be upon them at that late hour; another minute, and the arms were dropped, for the door opened, and upon the threshold stood a gentle lady in robes white

as the snow that lay about her feet—John's true love had come to him!

“Joy and peace to the house,” she said in her pretty, birdlike voice, looking round the smoky hall with a bright inquiring glance. “I have come to join my loved one. Will you give me your welcome, John?”

How timidly, and yet with what rapture, did John come forward to whisper his joy at seeing her; how proudly he led her before his father and the others, telling them that for his sake his bride had come a far journey to his home! If any one had been inclined to doubt the story of John's fortunes, there was none now but believed it every whit, when they saw his mate, whom no princess in their country could equal in sweetness and beauty. The evening that had begun so gloomily for John, had now become a season of bewildering joy, and he watched with delight how his beloved won the hearts of all at table. She spoke gently and lovingly to the goodman and his wife, wishing them many long years of happiness together; she joined in the mirth around her, and when a shade of doubt and anxiety crossed John's face, she smiled upon him gaily, as if to assure him that he must not regret the rash words which brought her to his world. “Let us be glad together for at least one night,” she whispered; and so, in

spite of secret misgivings, he smiled back to her, and gave himself up to the enjoyment of her sweet presence.

Hours after, when the banquet was over and the house wrapped in slumber, a poor, heart-broken little swan-maiden arose, and bent tearfully over John, who was lying fast asleep. "Farewell, dearest," she sobbed as she drew the gold ring off his finger. "Alas that we should have to part! Yet so it must be, because in your impatience you called me to appear amongst mortals. How mournful henceforth will your life be, and oh! how desolate mine, when I go to dwell in that land far beyond the world's end, *east of the sun and west of the moon!* Ah! love, would that these words might reach you in your sleep, and sink deep into your memory, so that you might afterwards arise and seek me in that home of hapless lovers, whither no one has yet journeyed of his own will!"

Then she turned, and stole softly downstairs to the deserted hall, and out into the white world of snow on which the moon was pouring its silver light. But where her path led, no one might ever know, for when John had discovered his loss in the morning, and ran out, wild with grief, to try and trace her steps, he found that the snow had fallen afresh, and not a print remained to tell of her passing.

In speechless anguish, he fled from his old home before any of the household was astir, and all day he wandered aimlessly through the countryside until at nightfall he reached a small seaport. He had but one thought, and that was to roam the wide world, so long as life lasted, in search of his beloved. But where was he to turn his steps? He was haunted by the memory of a phrase—part of a forgotten dream, he fancied—which told of a dreary land where the love-lorn dwell, far removed from earth's joys; but, try as he might, he could not recall the exact words which might help him upon his well-nigh hopeless quest.

Having determined to seek his lost one overseas, he had to wait many weeks at the little seaport until the wintry weather gave place to a mild springtide, when the sailing boats could safely leave the harbour. At length, one fair March evening, he went on board the first ship that was southward bound that season, and although he had nothing to guide him in his wanderings, he felt it a comfort at least to be moving onward to a new country. His dreams that night were of travels, untried and perilous, yet full of promise, and when he awakened in time to see the sun rise while the moon was still shining faintly, the words that had haunted his memory since that sad Christmas night, suddenly

flashed upon him, and he cried: "*East of the sun and west of the moon!* That is the land where I shall find my swan-maiden. But oh! my sweetheart, how am I to reach you there?"

He looked up gratefully at sun and moon, which together had recalled the phrase that henceforth was to guide his steps, and little else he thought of, for the rest of his voyage, but how he could journey to that unknown abode of the love-lorn. When his ship reached the shores of England he disembarked at the easterly port of Dunwich, and since he could expect no news of foreign lands in the quiet country villages around, he turned his steps towards London, where he might hear talk amongst the seamen on the wharfs about strange journeys—perchance of what lay beyond the world's end.

Sometimes when he stopped for the night at a hostel or abbey, he would relate his own sad love-story (always pretending, however, that it was the tale of another man), in the hope that some listener might rise to tell something more about that land of exiled lovers. But though his audience heard him with deep interest, and told him that no minstrel could have given them a merrier tale, yet never a man had a word to add about the country of which the poor wanderer was fain to hear. In time he reached London, and went down to the riverside, where

he mixed with all sorts of travellers and heard indeed of many a curious voyage; but to that land *east of the sun and west of the moon* no one seemed ever to have journeyed, or at least no one had ever returned from its shores. Then he resolved that he would begin travelling himself, and from that time onward he sailed from one quarter of the globe to another, till many years had been spent in fruitless search that brought him no nearer to his heart's desire.

Once he returned to his father's house in Norway, but when he learned that his mother was dead, the ties which bound him to his kinsmen were severed; and after he had seen his father and brothers, strong and hearty as ever, and Thorgerd no less beautiful, he bade them farewell hastily, for the place reminded him too sadly of his swan-maiden, and scarcely could he restrain himself from falling down in a passion of tears to kiss the threshold on which her slender white feet had rested that fateful Christmas night.

Reckless of dangers, he continued to roam through many countries until he found himself in an Eastern land in the company of certain traders who were preparing for a cruise to far-distant shores, where they expected to find great abundance of gold and precious stones. At his request they took him aboard, and

presently they set out upon their voyage with every prospect of success.

Time passed, however, and the land which the sailors expected to have sighted was nowhere visible; day after day they sailed on, and still nothing but sea and sky met their gaze; then seamen and merchants grew alike disquieted, while, strange to say, John felt calmer and more hopeful than his wont.

Standing one evening by the prow, he gazed at the setting sun with hopes so bright that he was almost afraid to harbour them in his heart. While the sun dropped upon the western horizon he saw the sickle of the new moon shining aloft; and at the sight of sun and moon he pondered on the course he wished to keep—east of the sun, west of the moon, and something seemed to whisper to him that this evening he was approaching his long journey's end. He cared not that the sailors were anxiously watching a heavy bank of grey clouds that lay upon the water's edge in the east; the threatening storm had no terrors for him, and at night-time he lay down and slept, while the others, open-eyed, and shuddering at the great waves that rose like mountains above the ship's side, crouched together in fear of instant death. The night grew darker and darker, and the sea tossed the frail timber-built vessel, as though it

were made of paper, now to the crest of a huge billow and again down into a trough at the very roots of the waves. And still John slept, until a great wave swept over the deck and hurled him against the mast, around which he had the presence of mind to fling both arms, so that he escaped being washed overboard. Whether others, like himself, were still clinging to the wreck, he could not see, but it was soon plain that all were alike doomed, for the ship was rapidly filling with water. On and on he was swept through the billows, while through his mind rushed crowded memories of his loved swan-maiden; and horror of the shipwreck and the raging black sea was lost in strangely peaceful dreams of her for whose sake he was even then drifting to an untimely end. Then the wrecked vessel reeled beneath a last, violent shock, the waves met with a roar above his head, and John sank down quietly into depths where he felt and knew no more.

But all was not over. The swan-maiden's lover awoke to find himself on a sunny stretch of sand where the green sea rippled gently at his feet, without a trace of the storm that had raged the night before. A strange contentment filled his heart as he thought of all the toils and perils he had safely passed through; surely,

said he, his life would not have been preserved, had he not been destined to see his beloved once again. For a little while he lay at ease, basking in the warm sunshine, and wondering vaguely what country this might be, which had all the charm of earth's fairest places and was yet unlike any land that he had ever visited.

At length he rose, and with a last gaze upon the ocean, which he was dimly conscious he would not cross again, he passed inland over daisied slopes, where never a building of any kind nor a human being was to be seen.

From the sea-level the ground rose first to grassy hills and then to an unbroken line of lofty, rugged mountains, which, having no passes, would have to be scaled by the stranger who wished to make his way to the valley beyond. John stopped to take his first refreshment in this lonely outland, from an apple-tree on whose boughs blossoms and delicious ripe fruit hung side by side, and then he pressed uphill until the sun set, and he was forced to wait till dawn before he gained the heights from which he hoped to look down into the heart of the country. So early indeed was he afoot next day that the sun had but risen when he reached the summit. Looking eagerly inland, he saw beneath him a wonderfully beautiful vale, in which the hand of man had been at work, cultivating fruits and

raising pleasant homesteads by the side of the stream that flowed between the low meadows. On the slopes immediately beneath the bare rocky brow of the hill, lay terraced vineyards and rich wheat fields ; lower down, there were patches of orchards which skirted the fertile meadows on the level ground. Cottages and trim farmhouses were there in plenty, and as John gazed down upon the valley, which the sun was now flooding with a golden haze, he fancied that the happy folk who dwelt there must be sheltered from all the woes that afflict mortals whose lot is cast in less pleasant places.

From this restful scene his eyes turned to the wan ghost of the moon, which hung low above the hills facing him, and then, feeling the sun waxing warm upon his shoulders, he gave a sudden shout of joy : "*East of the sun and west of the moon!* At last, at last I have reached the land where my loved one is to be found !"

He looked to find a path from the rocky ridge down to the hollow, and, seeing that it was impossible to descend the steep cliffs at the point where he stood, he made his way along the crest of the hill for some little distance, until the valley beneath him, which had at first been but narrow, widened out to a great expanse of sheltered lowland, through which the river swept in a wide bend. Far away upon the curve of

the river, gleamed the golden roofs of a castle, and at the sight of it John's heart beat fast, for there, surely, was the abode of the love-lorn! Presently the hillside become less precipitous, and, climbing down the rocks, he reached the grassy slopes, where men were afoot, making ready for their day's work in field and orchard. They were a well-thriven race, comely for the most part, and of honest appearance, but never had John seen such grave faces as they wore. They showed no interest in the stranger; if their sad eyes happened to meet his, they gave him no second glance, and none answered his greeting. On his way to the palace he hailed in turn a woodman, an elderly dame, riding upon a mule, and a young boy, who was walking by her side, but for all the notice that they took of his questions, they might have been dead folk. Indeed, so much did he doubt whether they were living men and women, that when he passed a group of girls filling their jars with water at the palace fountain, he laid his fingers lightly upon the soft hand of a maid to feel if there were any warmth in it. Yes; the blood coursed freely in her veins, but his touch could not rouse her from the indifference in which she, like the others in this enchanted land, seemed to be irretrievably lost.

Through groups of servants, men-at-arms, and

gentlefolk, he passed from the court to the hall, where all were streaming in to their early meal without a summons from either bell or horn. He stood aside and watched the dumb figures take their places until only one seat remained empty, and that was the throne in the centre of the dais. Then in his sea-stained, tattered clothes, he strode barefooted, past the handsomely dressed knights and ladies, and seated himself in the chair of honour. Just as no one had questioned his right to enter the palace, so no one showed either displeasure or surprise at his taking his seat upon the throne. The meal was taken in unbroken silence; unasked, the servants brought John all that he could wish; and then, smiling at the absurdity of a poor wanderer like himself having been entertained so royally, he wandered out of the hall before the others, and turned his steps along a cool cloister.

A maid brushed closely past him, walked to the end of the paved way, and disappeared through a door in the wall. The disappointment which John had felt when he saw that his swan-maiden was not amongst the people in the hall gave place suddenly to overwhelming excitement. The door in front of him led, without doubt, to the women's courts, and there, if anywhere in this enchanted castle, he would find his lost one.

With bated breath he hastened to raise the latch, and stepped into a court which was shaded by pink-blossomed trees and cooled by the playing of a fountain in the midst. There in the centre of a busy group of girls, bending silent-tongued over their spinning, sat his dearly loved swan-maiden!

Her face was as joyless as those around her; she had no smile upon her lips, and her eyes were heavy and downcast, but except for her sadly changed expression, her beauty was as exquisite as ever. John's joy unnerved him, and, too faint to move, he stood for a time and feasted his eyes upon that sweet form which for many a long year he had seen only in dreams. When would she raise her face, he wondered; and would her eyes brighten when they fell upon him? With trembling limbs he crossed to where she sat listlessly working at a piece of embroidery. Like all others banished to this land of hopeless love, she was deaf to any sound, and even when his glad, faltering words of greeting were uttered, she did not notice the man who stood before her; only, as if she were troubled by a dream, she gave a little start and clenched her white hands.

"Sweetheart," he sobbed, "surely your love has not grown cold? Ah! look into my eyes, I pray you, and behold your true lover, who all

these years has found no rest nor happiness without you." Then he poured into her unheeding ears the story of his love, from the morning when she won his heart in the meadow by his old Norwegian home, on to the late sad years when he had roamed the whole world in his distress. "Have not we both been sorely punished for my folly and impatience in calling you to join me amongst mortal men?" he pleaded. "Through all those bitter years I have never ceased to believe that our punishment would one day come to an end, and that I would find you in that country of which you must have whispered when you left me in my sleep that Christmas night. Did you not tell me, sweetheart, that I must seek you in this strange land, *east of the sun and west of the moon?*"

The potent words had no sooner crossed his lips than his loved one awakened from her languor. She rose to her feet, raised her eyes, and, seeing her devoted lover, with the sweetest of glad cries she sprang forward to welcome him fondly. Words came again to her lips, joy took possession of her soul, and she became, as of old, a light-hearted swan-maiden, radiant with love and happiness.

But it was not to his beloved alone that John brought deliverance. The spell that bound all the dwellers in that country of lost loves was

M. LAVARS HARRY -



“ HE Poured INTO HER UNHEEDING EARS THE STORY OF HIS LOVE ”

broken, once for all, when the name of the land, *east of the sun and west of the moon*, was uttered by one whose devotion had led him, through countless toils and perils, to win back his sweetheart from that silent, gloomy life. One and all awoke now to enjoy renewed speech and laughter, and to praise the constancy of the Norwegian, who had rested not until he had accomplished the journey, which no other mortal ever undertook of his own free will.

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