

*Two and Two Make Five*



ME.

*Vernon Knowles*

# TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE

by  
Vernon Knowles

Fantasy is that which takes the two and two of our everyday experience and makes five of them. This can hardly be gainsaid in a world that comprises, *inter alia*, an Einstein, a J. W. Dunne, and an Eddington. Even the most devoted realist will be cautious in setting limits to reality, and will acknowledge the possibility of his transformation, at any remarkable moment, into a super-realist to whom so-called fantasy has become actual experience.

The dozen tales in this volume make an attempt to record such diverting and deeply moving possibilities. They are tales of the super-real rather than the supernatural, or, if you will, fairy tales for grown-ups.

[1935]

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TWO AND TWO MAKE FIVE

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VERNON KNOWLES



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## *Contents*

	PAGE
THE CURIOUS ACTIVITIES OF BASIL THORPENDEN . . . . .	11
THE FIRST COMING . . . . .	49
THE BRIEF HISTORY OF A BOY WHO WAS DIFFERENT . . . . .	59
THE TWO SELVES . . . . .	71
THE ROAD TO TOLBRISA . . . . .	83
THE GREAT ONION . . . . .	95
THE BIRDS . . . . .	109
THE SHOP IN THE OFF-STREET . . . . .	127
THE CHIMPANZEE . . . . .	147
THE GONG OF TRANSPORTATION . . . . .	165
THE PAINTER OF TREES . . . . .	181
A SET OF CHINESE BOXES . . . . .	189





To  
T.



*The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

### I

WHEN I come to review my brief, but extraordinary, association with Basil Thorpenden, I appreciate at once how excellently the stage was set for his dramatic appearance and our meeting.

It was a wild October night. Ever since early afternoon the habitual gentle melancholy of autumn had been savaging to a frenzy, and now, close on midnight, the wind groaned and shrieked, as though bestridden with a flight of Furies; the rain beat on the window spasmodically, like a rattling of thin knuckles hopelessly imploring; and great drifts of leaves, snatched from the plane and chestnut, were flung, whirled and spun momentarily against the panes, then were lost again in the darkness.

I had drawn the curtains back, and for a time had regarded as much of the scene as the night would yield to the frail compulsion of my single green-shaded electric light.

But insidiously the sorrowful power of autumn entered my heart, and I thought on those things that may not be thought on without tears: of the swift passing of youth; of beauty that must die; of all that is lost when love is lost; of the innate loneliness, the groping, inarticulate unhappiness that hold us men—unendurable thoughts, all! And I gathered the curtains together again and turned to the fire. But—too late! autumn had overcome me; my peace was broken: a

## *Two and Two Make Five*

growing sense of strangeness seized on my mind : I felt withdrawn—far removed—from the world I knew : it lay remote, fantastic, dim-lighted and lapsing into shadow without me, and I, tremendous, a colossus, above it : pondering, sorrowing upon its inexplicable construction, its ways and its goal. . . .

This was ill preparation for bed, and I knew it. If I continued in such fashion I should have little of sleep, and that little dream-ridden and unquiet. To shake off the mood I rose and sought a book from the shelves. In this operation I chanced to observe the hands of the clock : they pointed at one minute to midnight. Turning then toward the bookcase, my gaze was abruptly arrested by an amazing sight : a pillar of faint mist was moving, very slowly and deliberately, from the direction of the closed door, along the wall ; moving *en masse*, with an extreme of wholeness, no one portion of it swaying or stretching out, straying or eddying, as is the common way of mist. . . . For a blank moment I stared, then bethought me. Had my eyes suddenly failed ? were they focusing aright ? But a quick glance at other objects about convinced me it was not a matter of focus. Was it misty outside ? “Season of mists” . . . I recollected. But—the absurdity of there being a mist in that raging wind ! And beside, the rest of the room was quite free. Then—fire, somewhere in the house ? This, a drifting of smoke ? Absurd ! There was no smell of fire ; this was not smoke—this shapely, actually shapely, mist, growing denser, darker, but now become motionless. . . .

And it grew denser and darker still.

I remained in my tense pose between fireplace and bookshelves, my head turned from the clock to this mysterious, incredible visitant.

Then the clock chimed ; and as it did so, the mist



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

drew itself even more compactly together and became a definite outline.

My brain strove abortively with the problem. An instant later, and no doubt I should have broken my pose, have struggled back to self-control, and stepped over to examine the phenomenon.

But the clock struck, and before my astounded gaze the outline became the outline of a man—in height and breadth. This suddenly was filled in, and without any commotion or disturbance whatsoever a middle-aged man stood before me.

“My dear sir!” he said, advancing.

Of course, for the moment I was, very properly, taken aback. Then I recovered.

“This is magic!” I cried.

“Well, in a kind of way, yes,” he agreed. “And I must apologize. Really, I must beg your forgiveness. I do trust I have not startled you to the extent of inducing any harm?”

Drawing myself together I assured him that, startled indeed, curiosity was really the sole hurt I could confess I had sustained by his extraordinary appearance.

“I am most relieved,” he said. Then—“Extraordinary? Well, unconventional, perhaps; yes, indeed.” He nodded several times, repeating “Indeed, yes, indeed,” apparently in deep thought, then roused himself. “I know exactly where I am. And I know what day it is.”

“You’re at——” I began.

“Eighty-four, Bishop’s Road,” he interrupted; “and it is now the tenth of October.”

A distinct note of triumph emerged in his voice.

“Correct,” I said. “But how in the world——?”

Outside, the wind groaned and shrieked, the rain beat against the window spasmodically. Ever since late

## *Two and Two Make Five*

afternoon all my thoughts had been strange and restless. On such a night, surely, might anything occur. The hours had mounted, tended, to some such extreme happening as had now come about—as inevitably (so it seemed to me) as a plant grows and attains to its blossom.

After such thorough preparation, how could it be expected of me to pay too high a price of wonder? But, in the interests of justice, I said, gesturing toward the window: "Sir, allow me to congratulate you. Your appearance is most logical, apt and opportune."

He smiled comprehendingly.

"Then, being logical, apt and opportune, it is forgiven?" he queried.

"Why, of course!" I said.

Thereupon we shook hands and sat down.

"Now, let me explain," he said. "My name is Basil Thorpenden——"

I interrupted with the information of my own; whereafter he continued:

"I am, by occupation—or perhaps I should say, by inclination—an occult scientist. And what I am going to tell you will, I fear, strain your credulity to breaking-point, yet"—he shrugged—"you saw me, only a moment ago, appear out of the simple air—out of the future."

"The future?" I exclaimed.

"Well, no. Of course I'm wrong. It *was* the future. Out of the present, I should have said."

"How complicated," I murmured.

He leaned forward with a smile.

"Let me continue, however. . . . I must tell you that in my house at St. John's Wood, I have a small room so fitted up—I am putting it crudely, for the sake of simplicity—fitted up with such apparatus as to enable me to enter, at will, into either the past or the future. . . .

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

You must understand that Time is not by any means one long road down which we progress, but rather a number of roads lying parallel to each other. All Time is, as it were, one great moment. Past, present and future co-exist. To-day is not solely the to-day of the present, but is in reality composed as well of strata upon strata of to-days—which, for the sake of convenience, we term the past and the future. . . . Now, I regret to say that my apparatus is, as yet, only in the experimental stage. I am unable to pierce these strata very deeply, or, as we say, to go backward, or forward, in time farther than a mere five months or so. And, alas, it is not at all reliable even for such trifling excursions as these. . . . But, to explain my presence here to-night—it was due to my apparatus unaccountably reversing the desired journey. I planned to go back three months and two days into the Past, to see my old friend Claston—since dead—who, before you, occupied this flat——”

“Yes, yes! he did,” I interrupted.

“—Instead, however, of entering the Past, I entered, to my intense chagrin, the Future. And, there being no means of returning to the Present, I necessarily had to wait until time caught me up, and released me. You see, quite simple. . . . But—how intolerable it has been—the waiting! It is a marvel that I have managed to retain my sanity! For these last three months and two days, you must understand, I have had to endure living through *this* actual day, the tenth of October, over and over. I know precisely all that is to happen in it—what I shall say, what do; what you will say; your every movement. . . . O, intolerable! . . .”

He fell silent; and I could only say: “Extraordinary! how extraordinary!” my thoughts mounting excitedly. But, shortly gaining control over them, I questioned him closely about his apparatus, and about

## *Two and Two Make Five*

his other activities. He answered my curiosity with care and patience.

We sat with our chairs drawn up to the cheerful fire. . . . And outside, October raged at her wildest : visiting the earth with her weapons of wind and rain ; stripping the trees of their fine summer-won cloaks of yellow and russet and red. . . .

I found myself considering Basil Thorpenden with more than a casual interest. I had liked him at once : liked his clear mind, his meticulous sense of values, his gentle sense of humour—as these were revealed to me. And then, his astonishing work : it interested me intensely. I found myself decidedly wishing to learn more about the man.

As he rose to go, he gratified me greatly by saying : “Do dine with me one evening, will you ? This week ? Thursday, Friday ? It is getting late now, and forgive me, I’m rather tired. These experiments are always wearying, you know ; and especially when they go wrong.” He smiled, and I reproached myself for my lack of consideration. But he would not listen to apologies. “Well, then, on Friday, at eight,” he said. “We can talk, and I have one or two things to show that may interest you.”

So it was that I met him, and our brief, and strange, association began. Looking back now at that meeting, I appreciate at once how excellently that stage was set for his appearance, and how impeccably its drama consorted with his character, as I came to know him.

## II

We had finished our coffee, and I had done examining a collection of spirit-photographs which Thorpenden had taken early that year—an interesting and quite convincing collection it was, too—when he rose and said :

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

“Come. I want you to see my Emotions Container.”

All through dinner I had had my first impression of him, as a remarkable and outstanding personality with unique mind and view-point, confirmed again and again. His conversation held me; and the references he made to his work—achievements and experiments—filled me with heightening curiosity and excitement. I had never before met a man like him. I felt it certainly would be impossible ever to meet his counterpart; such an experience, I told myself, comes but once in a lifetime. I was prepared to cultivate it to the full.

He took me by the arm and led me out: down a long passage and into a small room. It seemed a kind of laboratory. Against one wall were shelves holding much strange apparatus and machinery; the light glinted on polished metal and glass-tubing grotesquely twisted. Great earthenware jars stood about on the floor; on a central table liquids and solids in glass-stoppered bottles mingled with the usual chemist's varied assortment of test-tubes, retorts and Bunsen-burners. Thorpenden went over to a corner and wheeled out with great care a wooden cabinet some four feet in height and two in width. Sliding back a panel in the top, he drew forth a short flexible tube to which was attached a mask—apparently. I was reminded at once of an anæsthetist's apparatus. Sliding back a panel in the front of the cabinet he revealed a complication of wheels, springs, glass-cylinders and what-not; my unscientific mind failed completely to ascertain, and differentiate between, all the details of the amazing mass.

“This,” said Thorpenden, “is my Emotions Container: the work of a dozen years.”

I drew nearer.

“When you say your Emotions Container, do you mean that it is literally so?”

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Literally so," he nodded. "It came about thus. A dozen years ago, I became obsessed with the thought that many of my emotions, aroused suddenly—it may be, casually—in me, were often wasted because I had no object with which to engage them. This led me to consider what an appalling waste of fine emotion was undoubtedly going on throughout the world hourly. People experiencing this, or that—and the result a mere frittering-away and a loss. How good, I thought, if, instead of the emotion, unengaged, being irretrievably lost, it could be stored up, against a future time when it could be employed usefully! . . . So I came to tackle the problem, and eventually constructed this machine. It is, perhaps, one of the most delicate mechanisms in existence; for the subtlety of an emotion, do you know, is the subtlest of all subtle things. . . . I must tell you that this Container only takes the Positive Emotions, such as Love, Delight, Enthusiasm, Happiness and so on. The Negative ones, of course—Fear, Hate, Sorrow, Greed and the like—are worthy only of destruction, not preservation. . . . Imagine the use of the Container. You love, we'll say, and your love is not requited. With what an excess, then, is your heart charged! Applying the mouthpiece (see, it is within), you fit the mask over your face, then, just pulling this lever which opens the desired cylinder—the Love one, in this instance—a psychic suction ensues. Afterward, the lever is pulled again—this way, this time—thus hermetically sealing the cylinder. The mask is detached, and the cylinder remains stored with the unwanted emotion. . . . Now, later—one day, some time—you chance to have need of some love: a little, perhaps; perhaps a considerable quantity. Going to the Container, you just depress this handle—thus reversing the procedure of the mechanism. Applying the mouthpiece, pulling the



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

lever, the cylinder returns you the emotion to the extent you desire. Of course, it cannot exceed in quantity, all told, the amount you have previously given it."

I stared from the invention to Thorpenden, and after a moment exclaimed:

"It's wonderful! Really—I say! But what a tremendous thing! A benefit, eh, to humanity? Making for happiness, everywhere!"

He smiled gently at my enthusiasm.

"I—wonder. It really *is* a big thing: that, I know. But it could be so dangerous. A trifling readjustment, and it could store up the Negative Emotions. Any amateur scientist could think of that readjustment, and carry it out. Then—what a force of hatred, greed, lust, murder, could inform men! Think of war—the next war! The mechanism has so many possibilities—too many possibilities—for evil, you see. And the way of the world, the way of human nature, is to degrade things slowly and surely; nothing is sacred! The good would be perverted to evil. I know it. I fear it. . . . I shall keep the idea secret. I shall not let it pass out into the world."

He replaced the mouthpiece-mask, slid back the two panels, and wheeled the machine into its corner.

"What a loss, then! What a loss!" I said.

He laid a hand on my shoulder, and regarded me.

"Perhaps the time will come—perhaps—when I shall perfect it to the extent of making it safe for the world. Although, maybe, before that. . . ." He broke off abruptly.

"Ah, then there's a chance——?"

"Yes, a chance; just a chance." He dropped his hand. "But now, this way." He opened the door and motioned me through. "I've something else for you to see. Or, rather, to hear—my Hall of Footsteps."

## *Two and Two Make Five*

He preceded me down the long passage, and at the end threw open a wide door.

### III

It was a long hall into which we came, some fifteen yards in length and proportionately wide and high. There were no windows; the only other opening, beside the door by which we had entered, being another similar door at the far end. A series of pilasters upheld the ceiling, which was entirely unornamented and had, in its centre, a cluster of six electric lights. The floor was of parquet. The length, the height, the bareness—all conspired to give an impression of austerity and gravity. "My Hall of Footsteps," said Thorpenden. "A sad, yet glad, place for me." He paused a moment, then continued:

"I suppose all my life I have had every man's longing for immortality: to know, know for certain, that I would endure for ever. Like every man, too, I had my doubts. I turned at one time to religion, but could find no rest in it. Urged on, I came at length to think that the solution of the problem lay in—marriage. Having a child, was I not immortalizing myself? Would I not endure, then, down the ages? . . . So I married; and I had a child: a boy. Yet I had not thought deeply enough on the problem, up to that point. I began to think again. And I saw that my solution was not a solution at all. One's child is but the half of oneself, for one thing; and for another, he might die prematurely, or die without issue—and then where is one's boast of immortality? . . . With something like desperation gradually rising in me I began to experiment, with the idea of finding some means of perpetuating myself, and those I loved. Yes, it was with a very definite feeling of desperation that I began the

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

work: I saw myself warring with Time and Death. Not the first man thus to war, toward just such an end! . . . The years went by. I could see no success ahead of me. I began then to know the true power of my combatants. They would win! I was impotent against them! . . . Then I made a slight advance. I was able to immortalize certain sounds. And the first thing I did was to immortalize the footsteps of my wife, and of my son. . . . That was nine years ago. I have done nothing since. You see, in the very week that I had done this, the great catastrophe of my life occurred." He raised a hand to his eyes. "My wife and boy were killed in a railway accident. You remember?—the Orpington derailment: one of the worst England has known. . . . Nine years ago! . . . I gave up my experiments at once. I suddenly lost heart. . . . And, somehow, the problem does not seem so urgent now; I am no longer racked by it; the welling of desperation has quietly subsided. Perhaps I have conquered my vanity, my self-love. I am content to trust now to my old enemies, Time and Death. Who knows? Perhaps they will lead one by the hand, gently as two children leading a child, and will bring one into the land of heart's desire in the end, after all. . . . But listen; you shall hear what I did."

He moved to the wall, and I saw for the first time two heavy scarlet cords depending from the ceiling, beside the door. He pulled one gently. "My wife. Nine years ago."

Immediately, from the far end of the hall, came a leisurely sound of steps, calm and confident. They proceeded towards us. . . . Nothing else. Not the faintest shadowing of a figure, not the least disturbance of the air.

I closed my eyes; and swift into my mind leapt a

## *Two and Two Make Five*

picture of the woman, or so it seemed to me: the maternal-mouthed, gentle-eyed wife. . . . The steps rang louder, clearer; they were upon us. They passed by . . . continued on, through the door, and were lost beyond.

There were tears in Thorpenden's eyes, and his mouth was grown tight.

"Don't," I said. "Don't." I gripped his arm. "It hurts you too much."

"No, no. It's all right. You must forgive me. . . . Even yet, you see. . . . But listen to the boy." He pulled the other cord.

There was a sudden swift pattering: click, click! went small heels: the hurrying, eager walk of a child. Soon the walk quickened to a run, then next instant—temptation of the glass-like surface of the parquet-flooring—into a slide, long, swift, sweeping; it rushed past us and on through the door, and finished without.

Instinctively I waited for the laugh that surely followed that exciting slide. . . . But there was only silence.

I looked at Thorpenden. A wistful, half-wondering smile lightened his face.

"That is all," he said. "And yet—it is something."

I felt profoundly moved.

"Yet you've made up your mind? You won't go on with it?" I asked.

"No; I've no longer any desire. Maybe, above that sound of footsteps is the body of my wife, and my boy, and, maybe, patience and experiment could wrest them out of invisibility, yet—— As I say, the problem no longer obsesses me, as it did."

We went out.

"Was it not Whistler," he queried, "who ruled that when an artist ceases to be interested in the picture he is painting, the painting is finished?"

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

It was not until some time later that I took my departure. For my mind was full of questions on both the Emotions Container and the Hall of Footsteps, and on those other matters with which he had entertained me during dinner, and I was loath to leave without learning more from him. Eventually, when I came away, we had arranged another meeting in the following week.

### IV

When Thorpenden discovered that I appreciated Port, he waxed very enthusiastic.

"My dear fellow," he exclaimed, "I'm delighted to hear it! I don't know what has come over England of late years—trouble at home and abroad: no end of it!—but I'm inclined to believe that had she only maintained her proper and decent taste for Port, she would have avoided all this bickering and fuss, and be at peace now. . . . But, really! Does it seem a very far-fetched notion to you? Believe me, I'm quite serious. . . . However, here we are." He went over to a small table whereon were set a decanter and glasses.

"And be careful," he smiled. "This is a test case. I warn you." He handed me a glass.

And under his eye I drank it as Port should be drunk: a savouring of the bouquet first; a slow sip; then a deeper and quicker one. Lowering the glass, I murmured: "A rich, a magnificent, wine!"

"Ah," said Thorpenden, nodding. "You pass—with honours. It's Offley of '97."

Thus, early in our so-brief friendship, was a further bond established between us. When two men agree upon the intricate question of Port in all its details—shippers, years, decanting, temperature, even to the apparently small but really very important matter of the size and shape of the glass from which it should

## *Two and Two Make Five*

be, with gratitude and reverence, partaken—then, it is not too much to say they may completely, even bitterly, disagree upon other, such comparatively minor, questions as political partisanship and survival of personality after death—their friendship is indeed an indestructible edifice reared upon an adamant foundation. . . .

We were lounging comfortably before the log-fire (pine-logs, they were, and the sweet searching scent of the resin took the room, underlying our tobacco-smoke perceptibly enough); and our conversation, from the topic of Port, led slowly and inevitably to an exchange on Portugal, and thence on by easy stages to far cities and remote countries.

“There is one land,” said Thorpenden, “that is not remote, yet is scarcely known personally to many. However, the mass of people have all heard tell of it. When I say it is not remote, perhaps I am giving only half the truth. In one sense, it is here” (he waved a hand, indicating the room about us); “in another, it is outside the world. I’m speaking of the Land of Ideas.”

I leant forward.

“I know something about it,” I said. “Don’t be surprised; not at first-hand: at second-hand. I’ve a friend, an author, who makes periodic excursions into the Land, and of one of those excursions he has told me.<sup>1</sup> I know about Tinsel and Sham; of the Field of Imperishable Irises over which hover the Dreams; and of the old Maker of the Gods. . . . Oh, it must be marvellous, wandering there! But, of course, it is not for me. . . .”

“No; I’m afraid not for you—a lawyer. For poets, authors, painters, musicians, sculptors, and, to end the list, scientists—yes. Near my bookshelves, upstairs, I have the secret door.”

<sup>1</sup> This excursion may be found related in “*Here and Otherwhere*.”



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

"Will you not tell me," I begged, "of one of your visits?"

"Why, to be sure! Let me see. . . ." He fell into thought for a moment.

"I'll tell you of two," he said at length. "One of some considerable time back, and another, later, which turned out to be a sequel to it."

I settled back in the deep chair and relinquishing the cigar-end took out my pipe. Thorpenden, selecting a cigar himself and lighting it carefully, began:

"I remember that, feeling blunted by overmuch contact with the world, I had passed through into the Land of Ideas with my usual purpose in view: to seek out the Territory of Reality. Wandering along in a direction I had never taken before I came at length to the outskirts of a small town: a delightful haphazard clutter of buildings swarming up a hillside and crowning itself on the summit with a soaring tower of black and white stonework.

"As I proceeded, intent on exploration of the place, I became aware of a babble of voices from somewhere near at hand, and then, as I paused and listened, the ahs and m-ms of a gathered crowd.

"My curiosity was excited, and I turned aside, determined to learn the reason of the disturbance. Presently I came upon people, in twos and threes, hurrying in the same direction as myself. I was rapidly overtaking them when I myself was overtaken by a young man.

"I stretched out a hand, detaining him. 'Tell me, what is the reason of all this hurry? And isn't that a crowd I hear yonder?'

"'It is indeed a crowd that you hear,' he replied. 'And I am in haste to join it, that I may not miss any of the song of Saedi.'

"I asked: 'Who is Saedi?'

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"He looked at me. 'You do not know of Saedi? You must be a stranger in this land?'

"I acknowledged: 'I am, in truth, a stranger here.'

"Then, know: Saedi is a poet; he is the greatest poet we have.' He broke off. 'But let us continue, or we shall be late.'

"We hastened on, and every minute the noise of the crowd grew in our ears.

"The young man, on my questioning him, said:

"This is the hour of Saedi's singing. Every day at noon he appears with his lute; he stands at the porch of his house a while, the crowd acclaiming him; then he goes to a seat under a great magnolia-tree. And when there is silence, he sings. He sings until he can sing no more, when he retires. He is a man not come, as yet, to middle-age, and very tall, and of personal beauty. Not long ago he declared that the wonder and loveliness of the universe were become so increasingly urgent that nowhere could he look, nowhere, without the mood of song seizing him—his heart vexed, his mind aflame. There was never peace for him. And—how well he knew it!—wonder and loveliness sear the mind and scar it at length, and wear the heart away. There are things too powerful to be withstood by man—that break him as the mountain-fir is broken by the avalanche—and these are three: love and wonder and loveliness. Wherefore, said Saedi, that he might not yet be broken, that he might escape this surely approaching fate—see! he would bind his eyes about with a cloth, and shield them. So much had they seen already—their pictures deeply stored in his heart—that he would never lack song, surely, till the day of his death. But in peace henceforth would he sing. . . . And as he spoke, he bound a thick cloth securely over his eyes.'

"At this moment we turned a corner and were almost

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

immediately among the crowd. The young man plucked at my sleeve. 'Follow me; there is a way that I know.'

"And I followed him, and we drew away from the crowd, and took a path through a copse and presently emerged into a garden. Beside us flowed a small river; to the left a lawn stretched widely, broken by trees, and ending in a bank of canna-lilies and blue and white agapanthus. Immediately ahead of us stood the great magnolia-tree with the seat beneath its boughs of which my companion had told me. A young wind brought to us, in gentle wafts, the sweet, cool perfume of its blossoms. From the porch of the house to the edge of a shrubbery adjoining the magnolia stretched the moving, murmuring ranks of the townspeople. We, close to the river, close to the magnolia's seat, were alone and hidden from view by a semicircle of oleanders and bougainvillæas.

"‘I always come here,’ said the young man. ‘I never miss the hour of Saedi’s singing. And yet’—his eyes clouded—‘the length of Saedi’s song shortens. I have noticed it. Every day, it shortens. Others have noticed it; and they are asking themselves——’

"He stopped abruptly; then he went on:

"‘I had hoped, one day, to enter Saedi’s house. For, you must know, he has always taken six youths who promised well in song, and trained them. Lately, he has taken but three.’

"‘Then,’ I began, ‘does that mean——?’

"But my question was lost in a sudden hubbub that swelled into shouts and cheers.

"‘Saedi!’ cried the young man, pointing.

"And there in the porch stood a fine, commanding figure dressed in white and scarlet. Thick yellow hair flowed to his shoulders, and among it was twined a wreath of roses. The eyes were bound with a purple

## *Two and Two Make Five*

cloth, beneath which, too, half the nose was concealed; the mouth showed firm and strong and tender.

“‘Saedi, Saedi!’ There was delight and adulation in the concourse of voices that greeted him.

“He stood a moment, then with bowed head was led by his three youths to his seat.

“The lute was placed in his hands, but he made no movement.

“The silence deepened.

“The crowd stared expectantly. And so intense became the silence that a bird’s note trembled to my ears from far away, and the gentle clashing of the leaves, at the will of the breeze, sounded now harsh, now strident. . . .

“And Saedi still made no move; his hands loosely held the lute; his head had fallen imperceptibly farther forward until his chin was sunken on his chest. . . .

“And as I, within that semicircle of oleanders and bougainvillæas, waited too—all at once I knew. Yes, I knew. Saedi, with his bandaged eyes, had nothing left within him now to sing. He’s not going to sing, I said to myself. Is this the first day upon which he has fallen silent? Then, it will not be the last. . . . And I turned to my companion and whispered:

“‘He’s not going to sing. He has nothing left to sing.’

“Then I saw tears were in his eyes. He said brokenly:

“‘I felt it was coming to this. And what shall we do if it remains so? What shall we do if Saedi sings no more? Alas, I shall never now, never enter his house.’

“And Saedi did not sing that day, and returned indoors, and the crowd dispersed perturbed and saddened.

“But the young man and I remained in our place. And I said to him:

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

“ ‘It is that bandage of purple cloth about his eyes ! If he were to tear it away, he would sing again. He must tear it away ! Has he not guessed the truth ? It’s incredible, but if he has not guessed, he must be told.’

“ ‘He has been told,’ answered the young man. ‘When he first bound his eyes, a score of voices warned him. But he laughed. And he vowed to keep the cloth securely in place—so full were his heart and mind, he said, and so dear would be the growth of peace with the ever-fresh wonder and loveliness of the world waived.’

“ ‘Then,’ I shrugged, ‘Saedi will remain silent.’

“ ‘Still the people will continue to come,’ cried the young man. ‘For the people of this town own loyalty one of the chief virtues ; and how could they ever forget Saedi ? . . . And I shall continue to come. Each day, here in these bushes, I shall wait. And one day—I know, Saedi will sing again, and his voice will be even stronger and more beautiful. And then once more he will have six young men in his house—and I may be one of them.’

“ ‘And then he rose up, and I rose up, and we parted.’”

Thorpenden paused, regarded the small stump of his cigar with whimsical regret and deposited it carefully in the ash-tray beside him.

“That is an account of the previous visit. And now to relate its sequel, contained in a later one :

“Once again I passed through into the Land of Ideas and wandered, seeking—as ever, keenly—that most elusive but most desirable of all places, the Territory of Reality. I bore to the left, and shortly, escaped from the path, crossed silent fields, and thus unexpectedly came upon the Two Valleys I had only once before entered. Descending into the first, I became aware of

## *Two and Two Make Five*

its nature—and remembered. A low, passionate-beating harmony filled the place, and reached to my heart gripping it ruthlessly: the music of Things Passing Away. My eyes filled with tears. Somewhere among those welling, throbbing strains sounded the ardent note of my own being. And the thought of this—once realized—leapt sadly in my mind with the insistence of a pulse. . . .

“With what relief did I pass into the second Valley! The ineffable harmony that breathed there, tremulous and eager, caressed me like cool, sure hands. My tears were stemmed at their source, my heart. For this was the music of Things Coming To Life. And somewhere in its midst, I knew, small but sustained, purposeful and inevitable, rang the one note which was the springing centre of my being. . . .

“In that strange, bare field that lies between the Two Valleys, these two conflicting harmonies meet. They meet, mingle and resist. They would fly from each other; they would overcome each other; they each long for supremacy, but may not achieve it: it is ordained that they meet and mingle and resist. And thus is existence maintained, nor may the perfect balance between the two harmonies be disturbed.

“As I turned away, I observed that at no great distance ahead rose a small town. And immediately on a close regard, though it was so long since I had last seen it, I recognized it—that delightful, haphazard clutter of buildings swarming up the hillside and crowning itself on the summit with a soaring tower of black and white stonework! This time, I averred to myself, I would explore the place. . . . And then I thought: What of Saedi? And because the hour was close on noon, and the fount of my curiosity ever-springing, it seemed to me a more desirable thing first to see the silent

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

Saedi once more. I could pass on to the town afterwards. I wondered if the people still thronged to the poet's garden daily. If so, I was certain they would not meet with song so long as Saedi suffered the purple cloth about his eyes. . . .

"I pressed on, and soon reached the outskirts of the town. And once more I was one of the hurrying crowd, and I went with them. So, they were indeed loyal. . . . Then, at that place of which I knew, I drew away, took the path through the copse and presently emerged into Saedi's garden. In that garden, it must be always summer. At the far end of the lawn, still the red and yellow canna-lilies mingled like a steady flaring of strong flames ; with the blue and white globes of the agapanthus hanging as motionless before them, in a cool contrast. Still the great magnolia-tree was mooned with its blossoms, and all the air—hot, windless, in a tranced half-swoon—was heavy with their sweetness. I expected to find the young man of my previous visit already waiting in the little semicircle of oleanders and bougainvillæas, but was disappointed. Had he, as time passed, at length given up coming ? The crowd, as before, stretched the whole way from the porch of the house to the edge of the shrubbery adjoining the magnolia, and was growing in size momentarily. I was surveying them idly, when a sudden movement took them, and I saw the door had opened. At the same moment, there was a rustle of the bushes and a sound of quick steps behind me, and the young man appeared. With what surprise he observed me, but with what warmth greeted me !

"Then you have not forgotten me ?" I said.

"'No !' Then he motioned with his hand excitedly :  
'And look ! Saedi !'

"The crowd was greeting him : 'Saedi ! Saedi !'

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"I turned quickly. And there was Saedi, rose-crowned and white-and-scarlet dressed. Saedi: smiling gravely, standing with half-bowed head—and with the purple cloth gone from about his eyes.

"‘Ah, the cloth,’ I said; ‘the purple cloth. . . . Then he sings again? Was I not right, my friend?’

"The young man looked at me.

"‘Yes, he sings again. And how he sings! . . . Yes, you were indeed right.’

"‘But how did it come about?’ I asked. ‘For you told me he had vowed he would never tear the cloth away? I am curious to know,’ I said. Saedi had seated himself under the magnolia, and his six youths stood ranged behind him. He took his lute in hand, and the crowd, of a sudden, stood dumb.

"‘Hush! Wait!’ said my companion. ‘I will tell you afterwards how it came about.’

"And then Saedi sang. And though I had not felt that my spirit was in need of any sustenance at all—yet Saedi’s singing came to it as food and drink to a starving, thirsting man. And when he had done, I felt strengthened anew, and a divine comfort of happiness glowed in my heart. And I was trembling strangely, and unable for a time to speak. Saedi returned with his youths to the house: his path suddenly one of flowers, flung by the crowd. Soon the crowd, too, had gone; but the young man and I remained in our place; and at length I said to him: ‘And now, tell me how it came about?’

"He smiled. ‘In a very strange way. For a long time Saedi continued silent. But nevertheless each day the people came, always in hope; and each day Saedi appeared, and took his lute in hand. But weeks and months passed. The sorrow of the people was great, and always they were begging him to pluck off the



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

purple cloth, but always he refused because of his vow. And then, when despair was at mortal grips with loyalty : one day—how well I remember !—Saedi broke his long silence with a little song. And very gradually thereafter the period of his singing lengthened ; until now he sings as fully as before ; and the golden voice is more wonderful than of old : it reaches straightly to the heart and raises those thoughts that, like heavy-bosomed clouds, in their passing rain tears ; and it pierces through to the soul, knowing its way down those labyrinthine passages—stirring, with its poignant echoes, ghosts of the things long buried there. . . . And all this came about because, with the passing of time, the purple cloth was wearing, thinning : allowing first a faint dawn of light to appear, which grew imperceptibly as the strength and thickness of the cloth yielded. Later, came a dim sight again of objects—and thus the song of Saedi began, and grew ; and eventually the purple cloth broke its knot asunder, and Saedi was freed.’

“ ‘It is well,’ I said, after a moment. ‘It is well that it happened thus.’

“ ‘The gods are vigilant,’ responded the young man. ‘They answer the prayers of their people.’

“ ‘And as to yourself,’ I said, ‘you spoke of hoping, some day, to enter Saedi’s house ?’

“ ‘The gods,’ replied the young man gently, ‘the gods are indeed vigilant. Next week I enter Saedi’s house.’

“ ‘Then he rose up, and I rose up, and we parted.’

Thorpenden, perceiving that my glass was empty, went over to the small table and fetched the decanter.

For a time we sipped and smoked and discussed the story of Saedi. . . .

\* \* \* \*

Eventually I said : “Are you tired ? Is it too much

## *Two and Two Make Five*

to ask you to recount another of your visits to that wonderful Land?"

"My dear fellow, I am not in the least tired! But what of yourself? I would not willingly lead you to even the beginnings of boredom?"

I assured him that his leadership to such beginnings was an impossibility.

"Then," he smiled, "in that case I shall continue. . . . Let me think: I have entered the Land so often. . . ."

He remained in thought for a few moments, then stirred.

"I must tell you something you will have gathered already from my talk. The one desire of my life has long been to attain to the Territory of Reality. The Territory lies in a remote corner of the Land of Ideas, and is most difficult to reach. When the day comes, if ever it does, that I pierce all the intervening difficulties (and of some of them I shall tell you) and come into Reality—I assure you that, from then on, I shall not return again to the world.

"The many times I have sought the way, unsuccessfully! But recently I have learned at last the direction—and that is a great achievement. . . . However, I wish to tell you now of the Houses of Friendship: which I came upon during one of my unsuccessful attempts to locate the Territory. I was seeking the way, by asking all whom I encountered. Ah, then I didn't know that for every person the Territory existed in a different place, and though they indeed knew it well—being fortunate dwellers in the Land of Ideas, and different from myself, a mere visitor—they were totally unable to be of help to me. For a long time, attempting to follow their directions, I was thrown into confusion. Eventually the truth came to me, and I suddenly saw how profitless was all my questioning—since when I

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

have surrendered myself to myself, and I alone guide myself, with such success up to the present that I have at length, as I said, learned the direction in which the Territory lies. And surely now one day I shall enter it. . . .

"On the occasion of which I am telling, I had been directed by a lovely creature (whom I afterward discovered was a Sculpture shortly to be created in the world) to take a path through a forest. When I at length emerged, it was to find before me a delightful prospect of garden-land stretching a great distance and apparently ending at the base of a line of purple-clad mountains. The trees and bushes were all a-blossom; between banks of lawn small streams ran their broken silver, or dropped over sudden little hills, like a fall of shining hair. A faint breeze blew: just enough aery motion above to keep the clouds changing their arabesques, and below to mingle a joyous pot-pourri of flowers' scent.

"I passed along slowly, and came shortly upon a little house that had, thrown about itself like a gay shawl, a wealth of wistaria, almost hiding it. Pausing a moment to admire, and wonder as to who its inhabitant was, I was a little surprised by the door being suddenly swung open and a young man appearing.

"'Yes; this path,' he said, 'and straight on.'

"He pointed ahead to the line of purple-clad mountains.

"'But how did you know?' I asked curiously.

"The young man looked surprised.

"'Surely, everyone wishes to enter the Province of Beauty?' he said.

"'The Province of Beauty!' I exclaimed, and was disappointed. 'No; you are wrong. I seek the Territory of Reality.'

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"It was his turn to look disappointed. Then he declared :

" 'For me, Beauty is Reality.'

"He was turning away, when I said : 'Tell me, do you direct all passers-by to the Province of Beauty?'

"He nodded.

" 'But I am only one of the guides. All this,' he waved an arm, 'is peopled by us—as far as those mountains. You see, we are the artists who died young. We can only point the way.'

"With that, he returned to his house and shut the door, and I continued on.

"It was even as the young man said : on many a little house, thereafter, did I come, and from each emerged a young man with his direction. And I came at length to the line of purple-clad mountains, and I made that great journey over it, during which some strange experiences befell me, and I saw several wonderful things, but these I shall not tell now—Yet, stay ! there is one that occurs to me specially I might mention.

"Somewhere in the midst of those mountains I came suddenly upon a vast level space that stretched away to right and left as far as the eye could see ; and all the space was thronged with—what shall I call them?—Figures : I cannot describe them ; they were like men, yet unlike. Indescribable in appearance ! There were myriads of them : mingling, streaming to and fro ; and their passage and talk—for they talked—made a long, low sighing, as it were a perpetual sad-thoughted wind had its proscribed abode there. . . . I drew near in wonder and curiosity, and learned that they were all the Yesterdays the world had known. They asked my name, too ; and when I told, swiftly it was passed among them, and shortly about me grew a commotion

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

and a number of the Figures confronted me. And they murmured: 'Look. Do you remember us?'

"And I looked—and recognized the Days of my past life. Each told its tale, under my scrutiny: and old joys and sorrows, triumphs, fears and disappointments took me again with their long-forgotten newness. I was turning away, unable longer to face the poignant record, when one Yesterday detached itself from the others and pressed against me. And I regarded it an instant, when all the undying bitterness and grief in my heart surged up anew, and I beat it off, crying out. For it was the saddest Day of my life: the Day on which my wife and child were killed. . . . I turned aside blindly, intent on leaving the place at once. But soon I came to a terrible precipice opening widely and deeply in my path. Beyond it stretched a vast level space, similar to that in which I stood. And it, too, was crowded with myriads of Figures.

"'Who are they, yonder?' I asked. 'Are they Yesterdays, as well?'

"'No, they are the To-morrows,' I was told.

"And I saw how impossible it was for the To-morrows and the Yesterdays to meet—that precipice, whose depth held a roaring water, between them! That precipice—I shuddered; it was like a great jagged-toothed ogre-mouth; the rushing torrent like a black, darting tongue. . . .

"After some search, I found a way out of that Place of Yesterdays; and came soon to a pass that brought me to foot-hills, from which I descended easily at length to gracious, silver-misted plains. I knew that now I was in the Province of Beauty, and that somewhere in the Province was the splendid circle of the Woods of Endless Song, within which lie the Meadows of the Undying Flowers, whose midmost Meadow holds the

## *Two and Two Make Five*

rose-coloured palace of Beauty herself: to which come all the prayers, desires and dreams of the world's artists. Beyond the Province of Beauty, somewhere far beyond, I was convinced lay the Territory of Reality. So, I was congratulating myself: at last I must be actually nearing my longed-for objective! . . .

"I passed by a little lake, and took a path that mounted a hill. On the summit I paused and surveyed the scene. Nearby, in the midst of a peaceful park stood a large, rambling house whose quiet loveliness seized on me with all the gentle, moving intensity of soft, stringed music. As I stared, there sounded a step on the path behind me, and I turned—to face an old man of very erect carriage, who approached me and nodded.

"‘Yes, very lovely,’ he said. ‘But you should see the other house, beyond.’ And he pointed to the left. ‘It is second only to the palace of Beauty itself.’

"Before I could make a reply he had nodded again and passed on: turning suddenly from the path and becoming hidden at once by the thick growth of bushes that clothed the hillside. . . .

"It was only after considerable search that I came at last upon that other house. And surely the old man had spoken rightly: the palace of Beauty alone could exceed its perfection. It was built of stone that glowed with a dozen soft colours; and, surrounded by an expanse of lawn, it looked like a wonderful great opal set in jade.

"The veil of willow-branches beside me parted suddenly, and the old man of very erect carriage unexpectedly approached.

"‘Was I not right?’ he enquired.

"‘Truly,’ I replied; and regarded it again. And the wonder of it took me with all the triumphing pain of a first love.

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

“Then I said; ‘Tell me of it.’ For I felt that of such a house much could be told. Nor was I wrong.

“The old man said:

“‘The first house you saw is the House of Friendship. To it inevitably come all those destined to become friends. Within its walls they meet, acknowledge their mutual regard, then eventually pass out again and go their separate ways. . . . And it is, indeed, a very lovely house: its quiet loveliness being the timeless gathering from the innumerable friends that have lodged there. . . .

“‘But this house that you now look upon, transcends the House of Friendship in loveliness by virtue of its superior qualities. For it is the House of Great Friendship. The splendour of its stone is caught from the splendour of the love within, and shines forth with ever-increasing strength. To this House—so difficult to reach: remote, and approached by the most desolate and hazardous paths—inevitably come all those destined to become great friends. . . .

“‘I shall tell you of two I knew; and their history is the history of all who enter there.

“‘Koje was a young man who dwelt in the distant city of Lox: that quiet, cypress-crowned city of wisdom that is built on a mountain-top. And Koje early applied himself to books, as is the immemorial custom in Lox; and it was expected of him to become, in due time, an accepted and worthy citizen. But he grew very restless; and one day he declared that he could remain no longer in Lox. It was in vain that the old men remonstrated with him, and argued. At length they saw that he was not ordained to enter the service of Wisdom; and they ceased forthwith to remonstrate and to argue. Then Koje departed from their midst; and he knew not whither he was going, nor why. All

## *Two and Two Make Five*

that he knew was the inner voice of his restlessness, and it sounded very sweet to him; and he allowed it dictate his path. . . .

“Now, there was another young man, named Nald, who lived in the city of Terg: the far-famed city of athletes. And Nald was a goodly son of Terg: combining beauty and strength perfectly—as do all in that city of the plains—but Nald was conspicuous, even so: he ran, drove, boxed, and did all other games excellently, while in the art of soldiery he was of the most courageous and enduring.

“Imagine then with what sorrow Terg heard that the games and soldiering left Nald unsatisfied; and places beyond Terg called to him—and had long called—with voices of alluring persistence.

“Before much could be said by the city in support of why he should disregard those calling voices: Nald had risen up and left. . . . Much time passed with Koje travelling down from the North, and with Nald travelling up from the South. But, at length, their feet found out those desolate and hazardous paths, which few men find—and sweeter to Koje came then the inner voice of his restlessness; and to Nald suddenly the voices of alluring persistence calling him became harmonized and simplified to a single gracious voice.

“In thus wise they came to the House of Great Friendship, and, entering, met. Then ensued that miracle which always ensues in that House: Koje and Nald on meeting mingled and melted into each other and became one person. Issuing forth again, the Two-In-One decided to return to the city of Lox. But when they reached it, all there would have nothing to do with them and drove them forth: “You are not Koje!”

“And then they went South, and came after long



## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

journeying to the city of Terg. But when they sought to enter, the gates of Terg were shut in their face: "You are not Nald!"

"Then the Two-In-One went far apart from all cities and all men, and built a house. "This shall be our city," they said; "and it shall be called Loxterg." And they abode in that house, and the divine two, Happiness and Content, gave it protection.

"And it happened that, in the following years, others whose cities had disclaimed them similarly came by, and they also built houses, that to-day Loxterg is a magnificent city—and may it be your good fortune sometime to behold it."

"Abruptly as he had appeared, the old man turned from me with a nod of farewell, and parting the veil of willow-branches with sudden hand slipped through and disappeared. . . .

"His tale rang strangely and wonderfully in my mind as I continued on: wandering this way and that, seeking, but vainly, the Territory of Reality. And after a period of such wandering I grew tired, and returned again to the world."

Thorpenden lifted his glass, and looked across at me as he sipped. But for a while I was silent; then I sighed: "Of course, you know I envy you?"

"Ah, my dear fellow! But you may very well envy me when I've found Reality."

"That will surely be soon, now?" I queried.

"Perhaps, perhaps," he said; and there was the sharpness of excitement in his tone. "I know—yes, I'm sure! I'm very near it. Perhaps the next time—the very next visit——"

I had a curious sense of impending loss as I came away. O, he would find the Territory all right—nothing surer; and then—an end to our so brief, and

## *Two and Two Make Five*

for me so absorbing, friendship. I should never see him again. . . .

I was about to ask him, as we stood at the door shaking hands:

"Tell me now,—is this the last time we'll ever meet?"

But he forestalled me: "Do come in next Monday?" Then, intuitively, he guessed what I was thinking. "We'll see each other once more—at least," he said gently.

Then I left him.

### V

On the following Monday the maid admitted me with: "The master said would you please wait for him in the study? He wouldn't be long."

I went upstairs, and took a seat by the fire.

The late-March wind was loud outside and blew the rain in great pattering gusts against the window. Winter was doing its best to remain beyond its season: loath to yield to the first timid advances of Spring.

On just such a similar sort of night, I was thinking, had Thorpenden and I first met. . . .

There sounded a sudden "Click!" behind me, and I turned quickly, to see Thorpenden emerge from beside his bookcase.

"Forgive me," he said. "I was afraid I would be late. I hurried."

"Please! Don't apologize," I protested.

He took my hand and said quietly: "My friend, I've found it. I've found the Territory of Reality at last."

"Ah! Then that means—that means——?" I stammered.

"Good-bye to the world!—that's what it means." He released my hand, and put an arm about my shoulder.

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

"Let us go downstairs to the sitting-room, and I shall tell you how it happened."

When we were seated, he began :

"It is just by chance—the merest chance—that my search is ended. I have been in the Province of Beauty, pressing on and on, convinced—as I told you—that somewhere beyond it lay the Territory of Reality. At length, I saw ahead a great city built of silver, and walled around with a silver wall. My first thought was to pass it by : to go either to the right of it, or to the left. I felt that I must not waste time : I must go on. Immediately beyond the city rose a range of mountains, black and formidable, and it seemed to me that my way lay over them, and I should need all time and strength for the task. To tell the truth, I was not looking forward to the journey, despite the fact of my conviction that those forbidding mountains were the final obstacle to entry into the Territory. . . .

"As I drew nearer the city, I saw numbers of people approaching it and entering in at its gates. And as I drew nearer yet, I observed that all the people were in very worn, ragged clothing. Perhaps partly because my curiosity was roused as to what was the name of the city, and as to why so many people were entering it, and none leaving, and partly too because I was dreading those threatening mountains—I decided to pause in my search. Thus, by a mere chance, did I take the right, the only, way to my goal ! For that city, my friend, was the City of Love. . . .

"At first, when I sought to enter, those that guarded the gate barred my way. But was I not a lover ? Then they looked closer at me—and allowed me in. And I saw that, soon as the lovers entered, a transformation took place at once : gone were their worn, ragged clothes and they were dressed in velvet and silk, satin

## *Two and Two Make Five*

and brocade, all hung over with gems and gold. And everyone was at the peak of happiness. Music of the sweetest filled the air ; and everywhere that one turned fine gardens met one with a greeting of odour and colour : a thousand varieties of flowers ! I passed along with joy, and came eventually to another gate. From it, led a road straight toward the near-by towering mountains. And I asked at the gate : ‘ Whither does the road lead ? ’ And I was half-fearful of what they might answer.

“ They said : ‘ It leads direct to the Territory of Reality.’ ”

“ Then I trembled, and could say nothing for a time. At length, regaining composure, I questioned : ‘ Is this, then, the only road ? ’ For suddenly I was thinking it must be.

“ They answered : ‘ Indeed, the only road.’ ”

“ Then I told them : ‘ I have been seeking this road for so long ! To think that at last I have found it ! ’ ”

“ We conversed for a time ; and I learned that had I passed by the City of Love, either to the right of it, or to the left—I had become lost for certain among those giant peaks, for there it is perpetual night, and one is preyed upon by the Dreads and Doubts, so that I had never won through to the Territory. . . . ”

Thorpenden paused. And in the pause—“ Once again,” I said, heavily, “ Once again, let me tell you I envy you.”

Then I remembered—and made congratulations. . . . And later I asked : “ And now—— ? ”

“ And now,” said Thorpenden, “ I make my arrangements—at once. Good-bye to the world. . . . O, you’ve no idea how eager I am to be in that Territory ! . . . ”

We talked on. . . . But all the while I was thinking :

## *The Curious Activities of Basil Thorpenden*

"I shall never see him again. We shall never meet again. This is the last time. . . ." And it was.

That evening closed my briefest and most fascinating friendship. . . . We said "Good-bye" at the door. I went away quickly, unwilling to linger; glad for Thorpenden, so sorry for myself. . . .

A week later, passing along that street in a taxi, I glanced out as we breasted Thorpenden's house. It was forlornly empty, and had large "For Sale" placards in all the front windows.



# *The First Coming*





## *The First Coming*

It was after he had brought back to life the widow Kratzh's cow—dead a night and a day—that the village took serious note of him. The excitement of the people became such that, coming to his knowledge, the governor of the province decided—partly from fear of disorder eventually maturing, and partly from simple curiosity—to investigate the fantastic report.

The tall, gentle youth stood before him, waiting.

The widow Kratzh testified; and three neighbours, questioned separately, added their testimony. It was transparent enough: the cow had died, died despite all efforts of the three neighbours to save its life. The widow had wept: the animal was her sole means of livelihood. And then—*he* had come. He asked by what name she called the cow; she had answered, "Beh." He comforted her, and walked to where the animal lay and cried, very softly: "Beh, Beh;" and at once the animal stirred, rose up slowly, then moved away and began browsing. . . .

The governor was silent for a moment, then turned to the tall, gentle youth: "Is this true,—as they say? It happened thus?"

And he answered: "It is true."

"Then," said the governor, "I must surely believe. What else can I do? It is a miracle! . . . Tell me, have you done such things before?"

He said nothing, but at once a dozen voices spoke for

## *Two and Two Make Five*

him: "He has always worked miracles!" The dozen that spoke were youths of his own age.

"But why have I not been told before?" The governor turned, perplexed, to the chief men of the village.

They were abashed, and murmured: "We heard tales of his miracles, but took no heed of them, thinking them merely boys' imaginings."

To the dozen youths, the governor said: "Tell me of these miracles, all that you can remember of them?"

They told him eagerly—of how, when they were children, with a word he had mended their broken toys; with a word, too, had caused trees to walk, bushes to blossom, and animals to talk—to take part in the games they played together. Of how, with a joyous command, he had caused a hill-side to break into grottoes and caves. And of how, once, when he had gone walking with them, and become weary of his heavy boots, he had taken them off and commanded them walk home; then an instant later, clapping his hands and laughing, had bade them run!—and they had immediately obeyed. . . .

The governor exclaimed: "This is indeed testimony not to be gainsaid! And yet"—he paused—"yet it is in my mind to see a miracle with my own eyes before I carry report to the king." He turned to the waiting youth. "Are you willing to do this thing here and now? to work a wonder before me and this assembled people?"

And he lifted up his head and answered: "I am."

"Then," said the governor, after a moment's thought, "let one be brought hither who has long suffered from incurable disease; one who is well known to you all, and if he be cured while we watch, then it will be final proof, in my judgment, of all that I have heard."

At once the chief men of the village conferred together,

## *The First Coming*

and—"Radhzesy Mantwhze!" they cried with one voice.

"Go," they bade a boy, "summon him: let him be carried hither."

Presently Radhzesy Mantwhze, pale and wondering on his couch, was borne in by two soldiers and set down before the governor.

"Now," said the governor; and leaned back in his high chair. The people became hushed.

Radhzesy Mantwhze, crippled with an obscure ulcerous disease, had not walked for twenty years. All feared contact with him, lest the disease take them also. But the tall, gentle youth went up to him without hesitation and drew aside the covering, exposing the legs wasted and angry with oozing sores. His lips moved, but the people heard no words; he placed his hands on the sores that were thick upon the thighs, and immediately they paled and disappeared; he placed his hands upon the knees, and below the knees, upon the ankles, and upon the toes: and with his touch the red tide ebbed slowly and slipped away: Radhzesy Mantwhze's legs showed smooth and whole.

Then he drew back, and said in a low voice that, nevertheless, all heard, so deep was the silence: "Rise up and walk, and fear nothing." And Radhzesy Mantwhze, trembling, with tears falling down his cheeks, rose from the couch and walked toward him with faltering steps.

A sound like a vast sigh came from the crowd. The governor stared, dumbfounded.

\* \* \* \* \*

They led him out of the village in triumph to the great city of Tarjahze; and as he went his fame spread before and crowds pressed about him. All the sick that were

## *Two and Two Make Five*

brought to him he healed, and to all that asked his blessing he gave it.

There was constant singing and dancing and rejoicing about him.

"Master," they cried, "we know now that you are he whose coming was foretold, he whom we have long, ah too long, awaited!"

"Behold," he replied, regarding them with quiet eyes, "it is passing strange that a prophet should have honour in his own country."

"But, Master, why?"

Wistfully he shook his head, and made no answer.

\* \* \* \* \*

He chose twelve men from out the attendant crowd and said to them: "Follow me;" and at once they abandoned their wives and homes and callings, and followed him. They asked no questions, but knelt down before him, stammering: "Lord, Lord."

Shortly after this, the High Priest of Tarjahze sent word by a messenger begging him to preach in the ancient Temple of Az. He was glad, and hastened at once to the Temple. At the mighty gate he paused, and spoke to his twelve disciples and the multitude gathered about: "Destroy this Temple, and in three days I will raise it up." They were astonished and said: "Half a millennium ago was this Temple built, and forty and six years was it in the building, and will you rear it up in three days?"

Then, remembering the many miracles he had wrought, they were suddenly ashamed of their doubts and smote their breasts and cried out: "Let us raze it to the ground!" They sought axes and hammers: "As a sign that we believe, and that you may be glorified, let us raze it to the ground!"

## *The First Coming*

But he restrained them: "No, let it be;" for he spoke to them not of the Temple of Az but of the temple of his own body. He turned to his disciples half-wearily: "I ask them to go a mile with me, and they are prepared to go twain." But the disciples were disappointed that he had not allowed the Temple to be destroyed, and then reared it up anew.

He stood in the midst of the Temple and preached, castigating the people for their sins, expounding his teaching, and exhorting them to a different way of life. They heard him breathlessly. Afterwards, the High Priest with other priests came to him and said: "Behold, this is a new religion that you bring!"

"Yes; a new religion," he replied. "But, nevertheless, think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy but to fulfill."

"Tell us more!" they beseeched him. "At last that which has ever been dark, lightens: dimly we begin to perceive truths that have been hidden! Master, tell us more!"

But it was hard for him to speak then: the people surrounded him, plucking at his robe, crying out on his name—all the sick of the city: not only those whose bodies were sick, but those with sick souls, craving his healing word.

Eventually, when he was free he drew apart with his twelve disciples, and sighed: "All is not well. I came expecting persecution."

They looked at one another, not understanding.

"But, Lord, if the new religion can be established without persecution, is it not a good thing?"

But he hid his face in his hands, not answering them.

\* \* \* \* \*

For seven years he went up and down the land

## *Two and Two Make Five*

preaching; and then, returning to Tarjahze again, was met at the city-gates by the king, with the lesser rulers, the governors, the High Priest, and chief citizens.

And when he came up to them, they knelt down as one man before him and made obeisance in silence, whereafter the king took off his crown, and extended it to him, saying: "Take this; for you alone of all men are worthiest to wear it."

But he said to him sternly: "Know that I am already king of a kingdom greater than this temporal one you offer me. Lo, I speak of the mighty kingdom of heaven,"—and he spurned the proffered crown.

They made obeisance a second time, humbly, and questioned: "Yet why reject this kingdom, Master? Surely the greater includes the lesser? Is it not so?"

He was perplexed by their words, and had no answer. He turned from them sorrowfully, tears starting in his eyes. He withdrew with his disciples to a garden and cried out: "Alas, that I am accepted thus! For when this generation has passed away, my teaching also will have passed. I came, expecting not love but persecution. And behold, I have not been persecuted: instead, I have been loved, revered, accepted. I have failed."

And he left them, and went alone on to a mountain-top. And it was night. He sank on his face and prayed with great sorrow in his heart. He prayed with a loud voice: "Hear me, my Father! Into your hands I commend my spirit: for here, in this gentle and courteous country, whither you sent me, I have failed."

A sudden rushing wind blew down; the black heavens fell asunder. In the midst of lightnings God leaned out

### *The First Coming*

and caught him up from the mountain-top, saying :  
“ You shall try again, my Son. Behold, there is a bare  
land which I know, where dwell a hard people named  
the Jews——”





*The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*



## *The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*

THE great day in Mr. William Wells's life came shortly after his twenty-fifth birthday. It began, ordinarily enough, in the common diurnal fashion, but before its sun set—in fact, by noon—it had become indubitably marked and set apart for Mr. Wells as a day of days : such a day as, perhaps, he might never again experience. His mind in that hour felt extraordinarily clear : as though some cool spiritual breeze had somehow awoken within it, had breathed gently and purified its secret and intricate chambers. And exalted by this unwonted clarity it became adventurous and proud. It leapt defiantly : big with realization and growing power. And thus, in one stride, as it were, it made three discoveries. Three, as it seemed to Mr. Wells, miraculous discoveries. The first was that he really knew as much about the honourable, but difficult, art of baking as his employer—perhaps even more ; the second that he loved Elizabeth Geary, and wanted above all things to marry her quickly ; the third that his grandfather's modest legacy would enable him to do all that he wished : leave his employer, marry Elizabeth, and set up business on his own elsewhere. The sophisticated reader may not perhaps warm appreciably to these discoveries, thinking them somewhat obvious ; but it must be stated that to Mr. Wells, who had never until then perceived their obviousness, their magnitude was incalculable.

His realization, and then his wonder, dazed him for a short period. And immediately after the passage of that

## *Two and Two Make Five*

period, perceptibly his mind declined: its high clarity slowly became clouded; its exaltation passed. However, the great effort had been made, the supreme effort of his life. He felt a little tired. . . . Never again, indeed, would his mind be taxed to a like extent—or to anything even remotely approaching a like extent.

The discoveries made—and held by him securely; a plan of action drawn up: first in outline, then in detail—Mr. William Wells became his familiar, usual self once more. . . .

He left his employer; he married; and he bought a bakery in the nearby village of Beardswill.

The shop had fine double windows; three living-rooms over it, two behind it, with bakehouse adjoining; and a long garden.

It seemed to Mr. Wells, as he assumed possession, that married life and baking bread for Beardswill promised to fill a long life with happiness. But, alas! . . .

Now, it must be told that both Mr. and Mrs. Wells had an instinctive, deep-rooted dread of becoming conspicuous. To be, in any way, different from their neighbours was, to their imagination, the most horrifying calamity that could have befallen them. Their chief aim in life was to be respectable. And to be respectable, they felt, was simply and solely to do all things precisely as their neighbours did. To pass in a crowd, unnoticed, unexclaimed, was their ideal. And, it must be frankly acknowledged, they achieved it easily. No one ever noticed them; and, how true it was! no one ever exclaimed at them. . . .

One year after their marriage, they had a child: a boy, whom they named Thomas. Two years later, they had another child: this time a girl, and they called her Mary Josephine. After an interval of three years, their last child was born, another boy: Herbert.

## *The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*

The absolute normality of Thomas and Mary Josephine can be judged by the fact that each cried strenuously from the moment of being born; and continued to cry at intervals thereafter. Also, each was very disobedient, and naturally dirty and greedy. Both very normal, commonplace children.

But, Herbert—ah, Herbert. He was different. On being born, to everyone's surprise, and the doctor's grave mistrust, he failed to cry, but, instead, smiled wetly. And continued to smile! Nothing made him cry. On those occasions when his brother and sister would have exercised their lungs and vocal chords to the full extent of their powers he would merely look extremely sad, and his eyes would soften and take on a far-away expression. Nor had he ever once been wilfully disobedient. On the contrary: he was always anticipating behests—very often wrongly—which his parents found exceedingly tiresome. Far from being dirty and greedy, he was the reverse. His childhood passed without one mud-pie made. He never played at pirates or shipwrecked sailors, at the village pond: so never once fell in and plumbed the water and mud to their unpleasant depths. He never birds'-nested: so that his clothes were never torn. And he was always washing himself. Not only his hands merely, but his neck and ears as well. These proceedings, quite rightly, struck his brother and sister as highly unnatural. They came, slowly and surely, to dislike him. He was so very different from themselves. His mother and father, too, had long lost patience with him. When they questioned him one day as to why he had washed his neck (with soap) for the third time that morning, he had replied aggravatingly: "Because I want to be quite clean." Their retort to that, so nonplussed were they, was an irrelevant and uncomprehending: "Fiddlesticks!"

## *Two and Two Make Five*

As for greediness—it was one of their constant worries that he would scarcely eat at all. He had to be watched closely, and forced to consume enough. He had an extravagant habit—if not watched—of giving food to stray animals: birds, dogs, cats, fowls, and the like. He said he didn't want it; and, anyway, he'd rather the animals had it. The waste! . . . And his parents always knew: for he never told a lie. . . . Altogether, he was a great trial to them. There were Thomas and Mary Josephine, no trouble at all: one always knew what they were at, and what they would do; but one never knew with Herbert.

It gradually came borne in upon Mr. and Mrs. Wells that, having a child so different as Herbert, their respectability was seriously threatened. They became fearful. It seemed to them useless now to hope that all would turn out well in the future. The years were passing slowly, irrevocably; and Herbert was not mending his ways in the least. Far otherwise. He seemed quite confirmed in them. Mr. and Mrs. Wells trembled. He would most certainly go from bad to worse. And what of them? Already, the whole village—it was plain—noticed something strange about the boy. The Vicar, at length, had even voiced the general feeling: Herbert made them all feel uneasy, most uncomfortable. It was difficult, perhaps, to say why; but—there it was. He shook his head reprovingly and sadly; pursed his lips; murmured something about the necessity for taking some steps in the matter; and departed—leaving Mr. and Mrs. Wells respectively perturbed and tearful. . . .

One day, when Herbert was between nine and ten years of age, Mrs. Wells tried on him a shirt out of which Thomas had grown some time previously. In considering the advisability of instituting a tuck in its too-voluminous folds, she had occasion to smooth the

## *The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*

material over Herbert's shoulders and back. The two lumps on the shoulder-blades diverted her attention from the task: whatever business had they to be there? Closer examination revealed decisive hard swellings imposed actually upon the shoulder-blades. She could not possibly account for their presence. Herbert acknowledged that he had been aware of them for some little time past. No; they didn't hurt. . . . He saw his mother was worried; and wondered what he could do. After all, she mustn't worry; it didn't matter really. He tried to assure her; but her stern expression and deep frown were not to be smoothed away. She went to her husband: "That boy will be the death of me. . . ." Within the next few months the hard lumps had developed into definite protuberances, covered with a fine down.

Their worst fears, the most horrible of their suspicions, were thus realized in the agitated minds and bosoms of Mr. and Mrs. Wells. Not only was Herbert different from all other children, but in what a way was he different! Now, how was it possible for them ever again to hold up their heads in Beardswill? What would they do about it? What *could* they do? . . .

They talked and thought: angrily, tearfully. . . .

Herbert was growing wings! Why was Heaven punishing them thus? What evil, secret and black, knowingly or unknowingly, had they committed? what sin, so loathsome and unspeakable, that they should be visited with retribution in this monstrous form?

Their agitation persisted. . . . And time passed. And Herbert's wings grew long and wonderful; the fine down changed to plumage: white with a thin edging of gold. . . . His parents' grief and bitterness made him constantly sorrowful. He had been powerless to prevent the coming of the wings; he was as powerless,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

naturally, to dispose of them. . . . At first, in an attempt to mitigate the dreadful situation slightly, Mrs. Wells took shears regularly to the plumage. How it shone in the candle-light, the white-and-gold mass, as it fell from the determined shears ! It shone, it glittered : beautiful indeed. But Mrs. Wells gathered it all up quickly, and burned it to the last vestige : "disposing of the shame," she called it.

But shame is a notoriously difficult thing to dispose of effectively and completely ; and at length the time came when Mrs. Wells had to acknowledge that, the plumage growing with such rapidity, and gaining so in toughness with each shearing : the task was beyond her powers of coping with it. Mr. Wells might continue with it, if he liked, but as for her—— And Mr. Wells did continue with it—for exactly a week—then he realized it was beyond him, too.

The only thing left to do now, was to make Herbert a long cloak—which he would always have to wear.

This was done : a long, dark, many-folded cloak ; and he was told to keep his wings always as closely and flatly held to his body as possible. It couldn't be helped if it was rather a strain to him : it was his misfortune that he had grown the things ; he must now put up with their ensuing inconvenience. . . .

They had to admit that he never complained ; and that his scrupulous regard for their wishes (the wings became scarcely noticeable at all) almost led them to forgive his sin of commission. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Wells had always been an ardent gardener. In between his bakings, he lavished as much time as he could on his long garden : specializing in standard roses. Inevitably—for he was as capable with his roses as with



## *The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*

his loaves—the village came to admire and respect his efforts. And it came about before long that his cuttings were in great demand. People from round about—the village, the district—would appear and make their requests: which would be granted them—for a consideration. . . .

One Sunday afternoon, Catastrophe—who, as Mr. and Mrs. Wells had long fearfully sensed, was regarding them closely and cunningly, awaiting her own moment in which to appear and strike—suddenly decided the moment had come. . . .

Miss Wilkins, the post-mistress; Mr. Sworn, the butcher; and Mrs. Todd, wife of the constable, had called for cuttings. Mr. Wells, with pride and volubility, proceeded from bush to bush, snipping a length off here and there. In such occupation he reached the end of the garden, with his wife, Miss Wilkins, Mr. Sworn and Mrs. Todd fluttering about him.

At the other end, by the house, stood Herbert engaged in gentle meditation.

All at once, in the midst of his delicate operations, Mr. Wells bellowed to Herbert for a trowel:

“Trowel, Herbert! Hurry, boy!”

The bellow roused Herbert from his meditation, and he sought the trowel with a jump. As he emerged with it from the tool-house, Mr. Wells unwisely bellowed again:

“Hurry, I said!”

The quality of urgency in his voice roused Herbert to further effort. He trotted, he ran, he sprinted—and then, before his audience’s startled and horrified gaze, rose suddenly into the air, flapping violently, his long cloak streaming behind him in thunder-cloud fashion. . . .

It is to be supposed that Catastrophe contemplated the scene of chaotic consternation with her usual but

## *Two and Two Make Five*

half-appeased smile. . . . The direct outcome of the incident became apparent the following week: Mr. Wells began to lose custom. He groaned; he stamped about. But he continued to lose custom—and so, until it was all gone. . . . This was the end. Everyone knew, now, about Herbert. They were disgraced before the whole world. . . .

But they were wrong. It was not yet the end. . . .

Another business was procured in a distant village forthwith, and thither the family removed.

With great discretion and circumspection must they proceed now. Not one hint, not one suspicion, must be allowed, or roused in their new village: their very existence was jeopardized. To safeguard it, they very properly confined Herbert within doors: never again must he be allowed out. That, of course, had been their initial mistake in Beardswill. Why should a young man of his age wear such a cloak, if, indeed, it was not because he had something to conceal? Tongues wagged spontaneously on such a sight—and quite understandably, too.

Scarcely had the family been in its new home a month, when Herbert began to develop a halo. At first, it was just a ring of vague, dim light: resembling, in its particled composition, a circular wreathing of fog. But as the weeks passed it grew steadily in brilliance: became white, then golden, then iris—iridescent with a dozen woven colours: dazzling, inescapable: floating, always, some few inches above his head.

He was become a quite impossible person. . . .

Because his wings—so long, broad, beautiful: all white-and-gold—became cramped owing to their lack of exercise: two or three times a day he would stretch them out in his room, and then—flap, flap, flap! What a commotion! the sound was heard loudly all over the

## *The Brief History of a Boy who was Different*

house and shop, and for some distance away. And the wind that was created, and went gustily abroad! . . . So he was asked, at length, to stop the practice. Of course, he complied instantly. . . . They asked him about the halo, as well. It had become so trying to look at him. Like looking at the sun. They were compelled to wear smoked glasses when with him. . . . And, not only was he trying to them by day, but by night as well. The fierce glory of his halo had a most annoying, penetrative power; and when they had gone to bed, and the lights all out: there were their bedrooms filled with this uncomfortable, unwavering, parti-coloured glare. . . .

He listened to them with extreme patience, then said he was very sorry, but he was afraid he could do nothing at all with the halo: it would just have to exist as it was. . . .

So, immured in his small room day and night after day and night—the weeks, the months passing: it was no wonder that he paled and thinned. And it was truly a great relief to Mr. and Mrs. Wells, and to Thomas and Mary Josephine, when he died at length—with no cry, no word at all: just a faint trembling of the lovely mass of white-and-gold, then a gentle lidding of the eyes. . . .

When he was placed in the coffin, it was found that the halo, which was luminous and splendid as ever, would not enter, but remained floating outside, over the end. They tried to make it enter, to hide it—but in vain.

But this was their final trial.

After much consideration, they instructed the undertaker to drive the hearse along the sunny side of the street to the cemetery: as in the strong July sunshine the halo, they hoped, would pass unnoticed. After some slight demur, the undertaker agreed; and it must be admitted that the procession, though dignified indeed,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

took rather an erratic course in the view of the casual onlooker : proceeding, as it did, in a more or less zig-zag manner : at times from one side of one street to the opposite side of the next. . . .

Happily, however, when the coffin was lowered, the halo descended with it ; and the heaped earth buried both satisfactorily. . . .

With almost a feeling of renewed youth Mr. and Mrs. Wells continued their life from this moment ; and Mr. Wells devoted himself to his loaves and roses with intense zest : happy with them, and with Mrs. Wells, Thomas and Mary Josephine. . . .

## *The Two Selves*



## *The Two Selves*

PEOPLE were always telling Mr. Blenkinsop that they simply could not understand why he saw so much of Mr. Zaye. Mr. Zaye was Very Odd indeed, they were never tired of pointing out ; there were strange tales circulating about him. Surely Mr. Blenkinsop had heard them ? Why, then, how ever could he possibly—— ?

Mr. Blenkinsop had heard the tales—often ; and it was certainly true they were exceedingly strange tales ; but it must be said that it had been their very strangeness that had first attracted him to Mr. Zaye. He had far too much imagination and natural curiosity to attempt to resist making the acquaintance of a man who was reputed to have definite magical powers—he felt himself drawn to him immediately.

There was truth in the tales, too, he soon found. Mr. Zaye had, indeed, a profound knowledge of magic, and his lines of study were as numerous as they were uncommon. At present he was engaged in unremitting search of that ancient will-o'-the-wisp, the Philosopher's Stone. . . .

At first, with his new acquaintance Mr. Zaye had been inclined to reticence and caution, but Mr. Blenkinsop's ardent enthusiasm had very quickly won him over to voluble and intricate explanation and discussion, and, finally, to practical demonstrations.

It was in vain that people pursed their lips and frowned at Mr. Blenkinsop, telling him they "simply could not understand" the sudden friendship. Mr. Blenkinsop

## *Two and Two Make Five*

merely replied that they really needn't attempt to understand, since they found it so difficult, and he would be only too glad if they would desist from their abortive labour. Somehow, this only made them more concerned than ever: they pursed their lips even tighter and frowned even more fiercely, and muttered ominously something about "no good coming of it, then." And they were right, as it turned out. No good *did* come of it. . . .

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Mr. Zaye was explaining to Mr. Blenkinsop what he wanted him to do. "It's quite simple, my dear fellow," he was saying. "First, I just separate your good self from your evil self: split you in two. Then your good self must enter this innermost circle and command: 'Radadanthus minuhoë!' Have you got the words?—Radadanthus minuhoë—Your evil self, meanwhile, must stay——"

"But I don't quite follow," Mr. Blenkinsop interrupted—meaning that he did not entirely relish the undertaking. "Is it absolutely necessary to—er—split me in two?"

"Absolutely," declared Mr. Zaye. "You see"—he took up a thick folio and turned the leaves—"The instruction reads: 'The man must be innocent and pure, without taint or blemish, to command of the Seventh Master of the Eternal Wisdom the key-word of power——' Then it goes on: 'That which is evil in a man, and that which is good, can be disentwined each from each and made to inhabit separate identical bodies, as is set out in the Fifteenth Usage of Quon Ra-Shi in the Book of Initial Practices. . . .' Now, let me see—O, yes, here: 'Should aught of evil, even the veriest spot, approach within the innermost circle



## *The Two Selves*

and with unclean lips utter the command, immediate death would be the penalty. 'Therefore——' Therefore, my dear fellow, it's absolutely necessary to divide you. And it's quite simple. I'm here, you see, in this outer triangle; the pentagon divides——" He broke off. "My dear Blenkinsop, you're not worrying at all, are you? You're not ceasing to have complete faith in me, I hope?"

Mr. Blenkinsop swallowed uncomfortably.

"It's—rather risky, though, isn't it?" For the first time, he was experiencing doubt as to the advisability of being mixed up in magic. Hitherto, he had been a mere spectator of Mr. Zaye's doings, but now that he was actively to participate——

"You can trust me, surely?" urged Mr. Zaye, coming nearer.

And what could Mr. Blenkinsop say to that?

"All right, then." Mr. Zaye began bustling about the room. "Let us get along. Here's circle and triangle and pentagon—good; figures and letters—yes, but where——?" Suddenly he turned on Mr. Blenkinsop excited eyes and flushed cheeks. "My *dear* fellow, the key-word! Why, when we have that, the formula's as good as got! Think how we'll amaze the world! What a rumpus there'll be!—The Philosopher's Stone found at last!"

His ebullient enthusiasm seized on Mr. Blenkinsop and swept away every vestige of his fear and reluctance.

"Marvellous!" cried Mr. Blenkinsop, breathlessly. "Marvellous! . . . Now, tell me again. No, no: I have the words; but perhaps we had better rehearse a little? I stand here, first of all, don't I? and then——"

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Mr. Zaye threw another handful of the white powder

## *Two and Two Make Five*

on to the glowing charcoal in the little brazier before him, and a green flame rose up suddenly with a quick hissing, and the room filled with pungent green smoke. As the flame shrank, the smoke took on movement, and slowly eddied to and fro, contracting, until, the flame gone, the smoke had become a slowly-rotating ball that rolled buoyantly across the ceiling, from side to side, bounding noiselessly. Mr. Zaye then began the Apostrophe in a sing-song voice, and when he had ended, rang a copper bell violently. Thereupon, the ball of smoke split immediately asunder, and in a flurry of agitated wisps disappeared.

Mr. Blenkinsop watched the proceedings as calmly as he could. His excitement had ebbed a trifle, and he was aware of twinges of uneasiness assailing him. But he was very far from thinking at all; his feelings were occupying him to the total exclusion of thought. His mind could rise to no more than a recurring "Supposing——? But if——?"

Mr. Zaye, in a dramatic whisper, read the Petition, then hurriedly put aside the book and threw more powder into the brazier. As the green flame shot up luridly and the smoke streamed, he took a hazel-wand and struck the floor an imperative blow. It was Mr. Blenkinsop's moment, and he filled it generously. The blow of the hazel-wand seemed to pass through his being with the sharpness of a knife; he knew an instant of intolerable agony that wrung an involuntary cry from him—and hardly had it left his lips when he was become two persons.

The two Mr. Blenkinsops regarded each other with bewilderment. In all physical respects they were identical. In only one thing did they differ. The magic of Mr. Zaye had been unable to produce from nowhere the necessary clothes for the new Mr. B., and that in-

## *The Two Selves*

dividual's bewilderment seemed even more intense, somehow, by reason of his nakedness. . . . But Mr. Zaye was pressing on, heedless of all save that the Petition had been duly answered, and the whole affair was working along to a gloriously satisfactory conclusion. He ignited more powder impatiently, and rang the copper bell, and began intoning a jumble of curious words. The green smoke thickened and Mr. Zaye coughed. He coughed again—a dry little cough—and dropped hazel-wand and bell. Coughing spasmodically, his hands went to his chest, pressing there, then up to his throat. Suddenly with a queer cry he doubled up in his black-and-white zodiac-strewn gown and fell to the floor. The green flame was fading: the smoke eddied to and fro, contracting. . . . The two Mr. Blenkinsops stood immovable, looking at each other with white scared faces. Then one of them started forward. He went over to the still figure, kneeled down and began fumbling with trembling fingers. Next moment he rose jerkily, and whispered: "God, he's dead."

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"O, what shall we do?" moaned the good Mr. Blenkinsop again, as his mind took in the full enormity of the situation. "Whatever shall we do?"

"We'd better clear out right away," declared the evil Mr. Blenkinsop decidedly, "or else we might get blamed. You never can tell."

"O, but we can't be blamed. It's heart failure."

"Well—but so complicated. How explain *us*—being two?"

The good Mr. Blenkinsop buried his face in his hands.

"This is what comes of magic and experiments!"

The other went on: "Think of the future. You

## *Two and Two Make Five*

and I. We'll have to stay like this, now. We'll never be one again. For, of course, we could never explain what's happened."

"No, no! O, what a mess! What's going to happen to us? Poor Mr. Zaye!"

"Poor Mr. Zaye, my eye!" sneered the evil Mr. Blenkinsop. "A good riddance! If it hadn't been for him dying like this——"

"Really, you mustn't! I can't have it——!"

"Can't have it! Pshaw! Mealy-mouth! O, you make me sick. Look here, I'm going. Do what you like." He turned suddenly to the door. "After all, I'm free of you at last. I can live my own life now."

A terrible fear seized the good Mr. Blenkinsop.

"No, wait, stop! Don't go! We've *got* to stick together! You can't leave me! Let us talk it over."

The other paused reluctantly.

"Well," he said sourly.

"We've simply *got* to keep together! We're supposed to be only one. We *can't* suddenly be two. Do be reasonable, now. Let us consider——"

At the end of an hour the evil Mr. Blenkinsop had agreed—with a very bad grace. The two were to remain together, and exercise all possible care in their comings and goings, so that their duality should never be known. Life was to proceed as before, for the present; and as for the future—the future would have to provide for itself. . . . As they concluded the discussion, the evil Mr. Blenkinsop smiled to himself unpleasantly, and the good Mr. Blenkinsop, observing, felt chilled with a sudden dread—but dismissed it hurriedly as he could. Meanwhile—meanwhile there was the matter of Mr. Zaye to attend to.

It was soon arranged. The evil Mr. Blenkinsop was to return cautiously to his lodgings: the good Mr.

## *The Two Selves*

Blenkinsop was to remain, telephone for the doctor, make all the necessary arrangements, and then follow on afterwards.

\* \* \* \* \*

Life—beginning with that night—became very hard for the good, very easy for the evil, Mr. Blenkinsop.

Beginning with that night.—Arriving back home, tired out, the good man found his evil self already in bed and asleep. Of course, there was only the one bed. So perforce he settled himself in an armchair for the rest of the night . . . and awoke in the morning very stiff and cold. It was imperative that a new bed be obtained that day.

Naturally enough, it was the good Mr. Blenkinsop who went to the waiting office desk, and sat down to it at nine o'clock punctually. The slight hope he had possessed that perhaps every now and then his other self would relieve him for a day, was instantly shattered on its tentative appearance by his other self's stating firmly: "Forget it. I don't ever do another stroke of work. Have you got that?"

He got it. He was powerless. They must not separate.

"Not another stroke. Except, perhaps——" He seemed to be speaking to himself. A cunning expression flitted over his face, and passed.

The good Mr. Blenkinsop shivered inwardly.

"Except what?" he asked faintly.

"Never you mind!" snapped the other, sharply.  
"Mind your own business!"

\* \* \* \* \*

The good Mr. Blenkinsop duly minded his own business—for a time. Then, very abruptly, he was made aware that the scope of his own business included

## *Two and Two Make Five*

portion of his evil self's as well. It happened in this way. Rising blithely one morning he caught hold of what he thought was his own trousers, and in the act of donning them hurriedly the garment became entangled, and before his astonished eyes the pockets gushed forth streams of silver and bank-notes. Never until that instant had the mind of the good Mr. Blenkinsop entertained the vestige of a suspicion regarding the unknown doings of his evil self; but now a dozen suspicions sprang into his mind, and he trembled. His salary was six pounds a week; it was difficult for the two of them to live within it; by pinching and scraping they just managed to do so; and now here—all this money—at least thirty pounds—disgorged, lying about his feet. . . .

Very coolly, his evil self got out of bed and began carefully collecting the scattered coins and notes.

"How—how did you get it?" The good Mr. Blenkinsop, for fear and anguish of spirit, could hardly enunciate the words.

"Well, how do *you* think?" His evil self looked up, and deliberately winked one eye.

The good Mr. Blenkinsop recoiled in horror as complete comprehension lighted his mind.

"You *stole* it!" he gasped.

The other went on with his collecting, unperturbed.

"Naturally," he said.

\* \* \* \* \*

"This can't go on!" cried the good Mr. Blenkinsop. "It mustn't!"

"And why not, pray?" enquired his evil self.

"I can't have it! I won't have it!"

"O, still afraid I'll be caught, eh? Is that it? Well, you needn't be. I'm much too sharp."

## *The Two Selves*

The good Mr. Blenkinsop moaned. "O, to think of you—me—a thief! . . ."

"A very lucrative occupation, I assure you," murmured the other, taking from his waistcoat pocket a necklace that glittered startlingly, seemingly made of white and green fire, fondling it a moment, then slipping it back again.

"Don't—oh, don't!"

"You haven't quite realized, my worthy self, the unique position we are in. Even if—to suppose the almost-impossible for an instant—I *were* suspected: *you* would provide the perfect alibi."

"I?"

"You. Remember, to the world we are one. Now, do you follow?"

The good Mr. Blenkinsop followed at last: and another moan escaped him.

"It mustn't go on!" he cried desperately. "It mustn't!"

The other regarded him with contemptuous amusement.

"There, there; don't take on so," he said soothingly. "You *fool*!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"I've decided," said the good Mr. Blenkinsop slowly and with evident distress two days later, "I've decided to tell the police. You'll have to own up—confess. Things are impossible for me as they are; my life is too dreadful. We'll have to tell them all about—all about what happened at Mr. Zaye's. . . ."

"O, so you've decided that, have you?" sneered his evil self. "You'd put me in jail, would you? Think again, then."

"There's no need. I've decided," declared the good

## Two and Two Make Five

Mr. Blenkinsop firmly, and turned to the door. "You can say what you like, I——"

"I can, can I?" snarled the other, his eyes narrowing viciously. He leapt to the fireplace and snatched up the poker. "Take that, then, and that—and that!"

The blows fell respectively on shoulder, back, and head. With the first and second blows the good Mr. Blenkinsop's cries rang out their pain and terror; with the third—he fell suddenly with a short gulping groan.

There came a quick rush of steps outside in the hall, and cries of alarm. The evil Mr. Blenkinsop started; he had been standing motionless as a figure in a tableau; he dropped the poker with a clatter and sprang over to the window. Before he could raise the sash, however, and make his escape, the door burst open behind him and a flurry of people filled the room, talking, shouting confusedly; hands seized him, dragged him back violently and held him. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

In due course, the evil Mr. Blenkinsop was very properly hanged.

\* \* \* \* \*

"And serve him right, too!" said people. "He wouldn't listen! That Very Queer Mr. Zaye. Those strange tales about him. . . . No good could come of it. Of course, we *knew*! It was only a matter of time. He *wouldn't* take our advice. Ah, well. . . ."

And people were mystified, too, and inclined to be somewhat peevish.

"Never knew he was *twins*, all the time. The idea!"  
Yes; the *idea* of taking them all in like that!



*The Road to Tolbrisa*



## *The Road to Tolbrisa*

THE man, hearing my approaching steps, glanced over his shoulder, apparently in some surprise—then stopped and awaited me.

He was of medium height and middle-age, and wore a scarlet tunic that fell in a full skirt below his knees. His high turban was blue, with a single scarlet swathe in it—like a lonely sunset-cloud in a peaceful sky—and his hand held an ebony staff from whose head depended a profusion of scarlet tasselling.

He greeted me with the quiet courtesy of his country, and I replied with the blundering bluntness of mine. Perceiving thus, that I was a stranger, he begged that I would do him the honour of making use of him. In what way, he inquired, could he be of service?

Knowing enough of the customs of his delightful country, I refrained from a quick, deprecating refusal. Such brusqueness, I had long discovered, wounded.

“Whither do you travel?” I asked.

“To Tolbrisa.”

“And I, too,” I said.

“Ah, in that case, let us journey together?” he cried. “Once each year I visit Tolbrisa, and I know the road well.”

I assured him that his company would be indeed welcome; for, being a stranger, I had already, up to then, been many times in doubt as to the road; and I had been told that, all along, the way was most lonely.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Most lonely indeed," he said, and waved the tasselled staff.

We were in the midst of bleak, lofty mountains. On the left, the ledge upon which we stood fell dizzily away to a mist-filled valley, from whose depths faintly arose the turmoil of a rushing river: sounding to our ears like a drowsy bee among noon-flowers. On the right, a great peak sprang in a desperate endeavour to reach the sky; its width a-swarm with fir-trees; looking like frenzied soldiery tranced in an attempt to scale a rampart.

"Is it as lonely as this, the whole way to Tolbrisa?" I asked.

"For nearly the whole way," he nodded. "And you will understand how surprised I was, on hearing your steps behind me, when I tell you that only twice before have I met with anyone on this road, and I've made the journey once each year, as I have said, for the last thirty years."

We continued on; and he told me that his name was Stampana and that he lived in a town sixty miles to the north.

"Each spring," he said, "there is held, in Tolbrisa, the Ceremony of the Three Wines, and I go to attend it now. Perhaps you would like to know?"

And he told me of his religion; of the three gods whom he worshipped: whose province it was for the first to protect the heart; for the second, the mind; and for the third, the soul. Of the splendid temple where he worshipped; and where the Three Wines were poured, and drunk—the First Wine: the Bringer of Laughter to the heart; the Second Wine: the Snarer of Happiness for the mind; and the Third Wine: the Bestower of Peace on the Soul. . . . And then he asked questions concerning my own land, and its gods.

## *The Road to Tolbrisa*

And I told him of the crowded island from whence I had come, and of the cold remote gods worshipped there.

He shivered, and told me that the people of my country must of a truth be a strong, unshakable race: that they could love such unlovely gods. He said that it did not require much strength to love his own three gods; it was a childishly easy thing. And I told him why I was journeying to Tolbrisa: how I had heard that, among all the beautiful cities of the world, five stood out as the most beautiful; and that of the five, Tolbrisa was chief. I had been told that it was beautiful as a poet's dream of a city; and thereupon had determined to see its beauty for myself.

"Ah," said Stampana. "You have not been told a lie. It is a matchless city! The breath leaves the body in a great sigh when the eyes look upon it for the first time. It is built on an island that lies in the centre of the Lake of Brisa. And the waters of the lake are blue, almost to purple—an unvarying hue!—and mirror the coloured marbles of Tolbrisa with such wonderful effect, that it seems, from the shore, there are two cities there: one built above the other . . ."

We were descending from the mountains at last. Before us stretched an undulating plain, patched, here and there, with woods. Stampana drew my attention to a distant bed of rocks.

"Yonder was once a lake," he said. "There is an ancient tale concerning it. A man, who hailed from a foreign land, was passing by once, when he observed what he thought was a fringe of fire encircling the water. He drew nearer, in curiosity, and what was his amazement to discover that the fire was in reality a fringe of glittering rubies: lying heaped thickly! At once he dropped to his knees, and began stuffing the stones into his pockets. As he did so two great hands rose

## *Two and Two Make Five*

stealthily out of the water, and clutching him by the throat dragged him under the surface. A moment the placid silver of the lake was disturbed by wrinkling ripples—then it was still again. And shortly a little old man came running out from a wood close by, and ran across to the lake, and bent down and started to tug at the edge of the water. And as he tugged, slowly the lake shrivelled up, and became like a carpet—and the little old man rolled it up, and tucked it under his arm, and made off quickly again back to his wood. . . . Of course, no one has ever seen the lake since.”

We came out upon the plain ; and presently, since it was noon, reclined beneath a heavily leafed tree, and laid out our food. I had some cake made from sweet fruits ; and he had some lana-cheese, which was delicious. My wine was not sweet enough for his taste ; though he admired the colour : a true gold. Then we had beneta-berries, and nuts. And it was very pleasant, after the meal, to lie stretched out in the cool, sweet-smelling grass, and draw at our pipes, and send the blue smoke drifting up gossamer-like among the leaves. . . .

At length we were sufficiently rested, and continued our way. And I discovered that Stampana was a lover of poetry ; and he told me much of the strange, brief lives of the four great poets of his country, and declaimed impressively several of their poems. As he did so, we emerged from a wood, and a crowd of parrots, surprised by our presence, flashed noisily skywards : the green and red and blue of them spreading out and passing from sight, like a rainbow suddenly breaking and scattering in pieces. Very soon we came to a fork in the road, and I looked up at the two arms of the sign-post. One read : “ To Tolbrisa : 15 miles ” ; and the other : “ To Tolbrisa : 7 miles.”

## *The Road to Tolbrisa*

I was surprised.

"I had no idea we were so close to our journey's end," I remarked. "Only seven miles!"

"Fifteen," said Stampana.

"Fifteen by that road," I said; "but only seven by this."

"Ah, but we take the long road," said Stampana, with a gesture of his tasselled staff.

"My friend!" I protested. "When we can save eight miles? Are you serious?"

For I suspected then that he was joking.

"I forgot," said Stampana. "You are a stranger in these parts. So you can know nothing of the history of that short road."

"Nothing indeed," I said. "Is its history such as to preclude our using it?"

"Alas," said Stampana, nodding.

Then I noticed that, while the long road to Tolbrisa appeared well used, the short one was covered with grass and weeds, and wild-flowers thrust up their little coloured heads in gay profusion.

"No one has travelled by that short road for the last eighteen years," said Stampana. "Let us go on; and I shall tell you its history."

Before he began, however, he observed a bush of large blue flowers, growing in a ditch, and bent down and plucked two of them.

"Do you know what these are?" he inquired.

"No, they are most lovely," I admired.

"They are called nectar-flowers, and for a very good reason. Watch."

He put the flower to his lips, and pressed it gently, tilting his head back at the same time.

"You do it," he encouraged, handing me the other blossom.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

I copied his action; and a little flow of the most delicious, cold liquid was my reward. The flavour was quite indescribable: unlike anything I had ever known before.

"You do not grow them in your country?" he asked.

"No," I regretted. "This land of yours is full of the most delightful surprises. . . . But tell me of the short road."

"Well. . . . Midway between here and Tolbrisa, that short road passes through a small village named Berawena. Quite small, the village used to be: with a population of from two to three hundred people. And now it is absolutely deserted; not a soul lives there; not a soul will approach within several miles of it. For years it was called, up and down the country, the Village of Sorrow. Strange disappearances took place in it. Sometimes as many as ten people in a year. It was dreadful. It was fearful. Now it would be a small child; now a grown man; or an old woman. As perhaps you know, the country is entirely free from wild preying beasts—so no explanation lay in that quarter. The people were simple peasants: most of them farmed the land; several ground flour. They lived in constant fear. No one knew who would be the next to disappear. And they disappeared so completely! So suddenly: no warning whatsoever! It was indeed a Village of Sorrow. Often enough, they talked of leaving the place. But that meant abandoning their land and houses—for no man in the whole length and breadth of the country could be induced to buy these from them; of course they could not afford to lose everything; so, each time they raised the idea of leaving, it fell through, and they remained on: hoping always that the horrible evil would suddenly cease.



## *The Road to Tolbrisa*

But the years went slowly on, and it showed not the least sign of ceasing.

“One afternoon a young girl ran home crying wildly, and told a strange tale that as she and her little brother had been walking through the wood close to the village, a thin whip-like bough had suddenly bent down and bound itself tightly about him, and lifted him up through the green of the other trees, out of sight. A similar thin bough had come down at her, at the same moment, but she had started to run on the instant, and just eluded it. The parents immediately gathered together a number of neighbours, and all went into the wood. The same thought was at once in every mind: perhaps, at last, they were on the point of solving the black mystery of all the many disappearances that had occurred? . . . The little girl led them, and showed them the place. But they wouldn’t approach: they looked on it from a distance; and saw there a great tree, gnarled and twisted, as though it had raised itself out of the earth only at the cost of immense agony. There was a fierce ruddy tinge in all its foliage, and showing faintly through the grey-green of its knotty bole. The sun set as they stood there, in an awed and softly-whispering group. Then in the coldness of the twilight, more people came, and they brought lanterns. The whole village gathered in the wood. O they had no doubt! Not now. Not after the little girl’s tale. That tree—with its horrible unnatural hue—it was to blame: the cause of all their misery; and of their fathers’ and mothers’ misery before them. Surely, it could be seen: the monstrous thing batten on human flesh and blood! That ruddiness was the blood of their children; of their sweethearts; of their brothers. . . .

“‘Here! axes, axes!’ they cried. They would cut it down at once. Six or seven of the strongest men

## *Two and Two Make Five*

stripped to their waists. The people, overcoming their fears, drew closer, urging them on. They stood around the tree in a circle, holding the lanterns high. And the woodmen, very grim, started. As the first blows rang out shudderingly on the still air, there came a sudden hissing, and a hundred thin whip-like boughs slashed viciously down all ways, and gripped them, and flicked among the standing villagers, binding them round and round with their flexible length before they could make the least movement away. Then the boughs leapt up: up through the green of the other trees—out of sight. There was a horrible sound of snapping bones, and shrill cries of agony. Then: silence. . . .

"The survivors scattered away. White and trembling, they fled to the village, and knelt to their gods awhile. Then they decided: they could no longer remain there; O no longer! . . . So, they abandoned the place. Eighteen years ago. This new road was made—giving a wide berth to the village, and all the adjoining countryside—and, as I say, no one to-day will approach within several miles of it. . . ."

I shivered.

Stampana shrugged his shoulders.

"Ours is a strange country, indeed," he said. "Though it produces such a delightful thing as the nectar-flower, it produces also, by its side, a man-devouring tree."

"Tell me, they are not common?"

"No. I have only heard of one other. It was even more terrible. For it was able to move from place to place." . . .

Though we talked of many things subsequently, my mind all the time dwelt on the tale of the terrible, ruddy-tinged tree. . . .

The sun set: showing briefly to approaching night

## *The Road to Tolbrisa*

the West a splendid arras of scarlet and gold. Then came the moon : white and passionless.

We did not reach the Lake of Brisa until ten o'clock ; but had no difficulty in being rowed across to Tolbrisa.

As we had approached the lake, I had indeed sighed with amazement at the beauty of the city by the light of the moon.

"Ah, but it is a thousand pities we approach it by night," declared Stampana, "for you cannot see the blueness of the lake, nor the colours of the marbles. Now the lake is merely black, and Tolbrisa merely white." . . .

He grimaced, throwing his arms out.

"But how marvellous, even so !" I cried. "It is a moon-city !" . . .

And when we reached Tolbrisa, Stampana insisted that I be his guest ; and led me to a house looking over the lake. When we had bathed, we sat down to a meal served on a carpet of exquisite design, laid out on the balcony. And the moon was on our left—and stretched a silver road over the blue-black of the water.

And presently Stampana told me, as we ate, another tale. And we drank a great deal of a pale-purple wine from delicate, narrow-mouthed glasses ; and I thought the tale an excellent one, as he told it ; but I forgot it shortly—for my mind could not ease itself of the thought of that other tale : of the terrible, ruddy-tinged tree.



## *The Great Onion*



## *The Great Onion*

PROFESSOR ERNEST HERREY read again the sentences that induced in him such a sudden peculiar interest: "The largest onion known to Horticulture was exhibited at the Royal Horticultural Show, London, in 1903. It weighed 41 lb. 5¼ oz.; and, when dissected, was found to consist in seventy-three layers, or 'globes' as they are sometimes called. The onion attracted wide attention at the time, and was known as 'The Stampian Onion,' after its grower, a Mr. Joseph Stamp, of Surrey."

The Professor put down the book, and frowned.

"Seventy-three layers, or 'globes' as they are sometimes called," he repeated severely. "In 1903, and nothing's been done about it since." He clicked his tongue impatiently a moment; then leaned back in his chair and regarded the glossy, black-and-grey, gently heaving ball of his cat, Marcus Superbus, asleep on the green cushion of the opposite chair.

"Marcus," he said.

An ear was detached from a detaining paw, and slightly raised at the summons.

"*Marcus.*"

Dreamy amber eyes were revealed a moment, then veiled with suave determination. The Professor was not to be put off so easily. Extending an exploratory finger, and moving it gently to and fro along the cat's throat and chin, slowly the amber eyes were brought to a species of attention.

"You know, my dear Marcus," he began, "this is a

## *Two and Two Make Five*

direct challenge to Science. Nothing less. What have all the scientists been doing, since 1903, that they have not produced an onion composed of more than seventy-three layers? Bah! a mere seventy-three." . . . But here Marcus Superbus was quietly asleep again. . . .

The Professor allowed his gaze to rest on the open pages of the book. He could not refrain from drawing his brows once more together to express his emotion of mingled impatience and disgust.

Presently he snapped the book shut.

"I shall at once proceed," he declared, "to raise a Really Great Onion. I pick up the gage in the name of Science."

The Professor's estate was situated almost in the centre of the by-no-means large, but certainly sparsely populated, Island of Larindia. A few hundred yards distant from his house, stood a group of three cottages: and, a mile and a half farther on, the small village of Binder St. Lawrence. A light railway connected the village with the principal town, Harkerton, which was on the north coast, and with the three other villages which contained the remainder of the Larindians. A very scattered population; the majority cattle-breeders and farmers.

The Professor had come to the Island for seclusion; and seclusion had been his in truly abundant measure ever since his arrival. He was just beginning to tire of it slightly. His profound examination of the alleged indisputable proofs of the existence of the long-extinct *terriorus letinon*, had ended, a month back, in his sensational complete refutation of the proofs, his accusation that they were very plausible, very ingenious, but forgeries; and that he was convinced the *terriorus letinon* was in reality a myth, and had only existed in the lively imagination of some joke-loving writer previous to the



## *The Great Onion*

fourteenth century. . . . Having no longer any work on hand, it was, therefore, a relief to him that he had alighted upon this statement of the large onion—and found himself interested in it, and confronted with a self-imposed problem. Each of its three branches was interesting in itself: soils, manures and seed. When he had achieved a bed of the best soil, to which he had added the best manure, and then, finally, had arrived at the best seed, and committed it to the embrace of the combination—the result must be, scientifically, *must* be the desired one: the production of a Really Great Onion, transcending, with ease, the beggarly 41 lb. odd, the meagre seventy-three layers, of the champion growth of 1903!

He was eager to start on the task at once. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

Two years passed in experimenting, before the Professor was satisfied that he had done all that it was possible to do. He was now quite ready. A great bed was prepared of the choicest blend of dry soil, most carefully impregnated with the manure-mixture. The seed—a bare handful—had passed through the pre-sowing stages of germination the Professor had contrived for it. All was indeed ready. . . . Shortly, the seed was planted. . . .

Strangely, only a single one struck. The first hints were not long in showing; and three months later a thick tuft of leaves, standing four feet high, was waving over the protruding top of the maturing Onion: a mighty Onion—apparently some six feet in diameter, judging from the upheaval of the earth immediately surrounding it, and the near-by subsidence.

The Professor, tremendously elated, was not so excited as to abate one jot his scientific, detached attitude.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

He made daily measurements and observations : and it was apparent, from these, that the Onion had by no means as yet concluded its growth. On the contrary, it was waxing in girth and height daily ; its top was slowly rearing itself up, with its waving greenery : for all the world like a small hump-shaped hill surmounted by a wood. . . .

The whole population of the Island had called to see it. Some of the good people were so dumbfounded they refused to believe in what they saw. Others thought it a work of the Devil. The Professor, after all, was a stranger—he came from London, didn't he ?—and they all knew what Londoners were.

They shouted, argued, bickered. Buggies, carts, horses, motors, cycles had made use of every available road, and the Professor's house was hemmed in completely by them and their freight of people. Those who were convinced of the Onion's reality were loud in congratulation and amazement. Many were frankly envious. . . .

It soon became necessary to take measurements and observations each hour : at such a rate was the Onion growing. . . .

Towards the end of the fifth month, Larindia held its annual Agricultural and Horticultural Show. A deputation waited duly on the Professor to beg of him to enter the Onion in the Vegetable Section, that Larindia might put on record the fact, and honour, of having had exhibited in their Show the world's Champion Onion. But the Professor, convinced by his observations, that the Onion was still growing, and that it gave every promise of continuing to grow for some time, flatly refused to end its life. The result of this was that the Committee, determined on achieving the honour somehow, departed from orthodox behaviour,

## *The Great Onion*

and created a precedent by awarding (unanimously) the blue ribbon to the Onion, *in absentia*. In a solemn body, they presented themselves at the Professor's house with the award, one afternoon, and proceeded to tack it, rakishly, on the vegetable's side. This done, they departed, feeling they had extracted themselves from a difficult situation with much neatness, tact and *aplomb*. . . .

A month later, even the Professor had to abandon his so-far carefully preserved detached attitude. The Onion had exceeded his very extremest calculations. (One had almost said "imaginings"—but Science never imagines.) There was now—he announced publicly—no limit to which the Onion might not grow. It was, at the moment, threatening his house. . . . Two days later the outer wall was staved in, and portions of the roof fell in consequence. . . . Removing, with despatch, his papers and some clothing, and the more important of his books, the Professor shrugged his shoulders over the fate of the rest of his goods, and left them to be swallowed up in the monstrous Onion's triumphal progress. He removed to one of the group of three cottages a few hundred yards distant. . . .

When it became necessary for the tenants of the three cottages to remove to more remote demesnes, there arose considerable grumbling. . . .

But the Press of the world was thrilled, and filled with a wild ecstasy such as it had only known in the early days of the Great War. The London papers, possibly of all the other countries, ran the sensation the most completely and competently. This, of course, was only as it should be: the Island of Larindia being a British Colony, and so close to Great Britain. Shortly, however, it was observed that the ever-enterprising *Morning Express* was determined to constitute itself *the* authority on all

## *Two and Two Make Five*

matters pertaining to the Great Onion. It began at first a four-page supplement, which it called *The Herrey Onion Supplement*: in which it dealt fully with all news, discussions, and correspondence on the subject.

A week or two after this was instituted, it was found necessary to enlarge it to eight pages, and instal a stop-press column. The Professor was the world's hero—Mr. Chaplin and Signor Mussolini being relegated to instant forgetfulness. He was photographed and interviewed continuously. Everywhere that one went there was only the single topic of conversation; and speculation was rife as to the extent of the Onion's vitality. . . .

And all the time, steadily, persistently, the Onion was continuing its growth. . . .

When it approached the village of Binder St. Lawrence, there was evidence of very real consternation. The vegetable was now three miles in diameter, and considerably over a mile in height. The villagers protested with one voice. They were being forced to leave their homes, and their livelihood. They could not do it. They would not. The Onion must be destroyed. The Government must step in and help them. . . .

But all the learned Societies of the world gathered together, and as one body, in the august name of Science, petitioned the Government to take no measures against the Great Onion, but, instead, to preserve it. The Government, after long deliberation, consented—and "The Herrey Onion Bill" was rushed through its various stages, and became an Act. It provided ample compensation for such inhabitants of Larindia as suffered from the incursion of the Onion; and also prohibited any damage being done to it in any manner whatsoever. . . .

On the actual day that this was finalized, the Onion had flattened out and obliterated the entire rambling

## *The Great Onion*

village; Binder St. Lawrence was no more. . . . It was apparent, now, that the whole Island would, in time, be covered. There existed a mere circular strip of land (the Island being more or less circular) roughly ten miles in width to receive attention—and the thing would be done. The island would be an entire onion! And what of all the people? Now confined to the circular strip—between onion and ocean—they would have either to take to houseboats, or depart for England. . . . While the whole world was wondering what would be the outcome of it all, the learned Societies of the world, foregathered in London, duly decided that the Herrey Onion was entitled to the tremendous honour of being accounted the Eighth Wonder of the World. When they made this intelligence known—at once people began flocking from all parts to Larindia. . . . The Larindians now perceived the solution to their problem. Hastily they built house-boats (very hastily, since the remaining strip of land was a bare six miles now) and in these conducted the sight-seers with a new-found pride in their Island—and also (this primarily) with hope (not risen in vain) of remuneration. . . .

Scarcely a month was necessary to despatch the six-mile strip: Larindia was vanquished and vanished: the Great Onion was in sole possession.

A very extraordinary sight it was from the sea: with its russet-coloured outer-skin, here and there frayed or worn, showing great patches of gleaming silver, veined faintly with green—a wonderful globular mountain, with a high crown of forest that caught the passing clouds, and tangled them in its branches.

A famous airman had sought to land on the Onion's top—a daring feat—but had found it quite impossible owing to the acute slope, and to what he afterwards termed "the veritable jungle" it possessed.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Closely following on this gallant attempt, a celebrated Alpinist made application to Parliament for permission to contravene the "No Damage" Act, to the extent of cutting steps up the Onion—with the one purpose (as he maintained) of affixing the Union Jack to its apex.

This permission graciously accorded, the Alpinist essayed the ascent in the presence of thousands of people who watched him from boats. Innumerable cameras clicked, as he courteously waved a hand to the multitude in acknowledgment of their vociferous cheers; and cinematograph-machines were in evidence in the most favoured positions to record as much of the venture as they could.

He was absent eight days. Then, reappearing, completely worn out with the arduousness of the assault, he could only nod faintly in reply to the pressmen's inquiry as to whether he had succeeded.

He was fêted and honoured in due course. His ascent was likened to the "Epic of Everest." The Royal Alpine Club awarded him its gold medal. The King sent a telegram of admiring congratulation, and was pleased to bestow on him the accolade of Knighthood.

Unfortunately, he did not live long to enjoy these honours. A month later, whilst climbing a ladder to disengage a tendril of ivy from the antennæ of the wireless attached to his country cottage in Dorset, he fell—a mere distance of fourteen feet—and broke his neck, death being instantaneous. . . .

When the Onion was overhanging the Island by some seven or eight miles, abruptly the *Morning Express* changed its favourable attitude toward the Eighth Wonder, and appeared one morning with the impressive, and terrifying, headlines: "*The Great Onion Menace. England in Danger of Being Obliterated. Famous Scientist Fixes Date Thirty-Eight Years Hence.*" Followed the

## *The Great Onion*

Scientist's calculation, based, of course, on the consistent past growth of the vegetable. . . .

The following morning—still retaining the headline "*The Great Onion Menace*"—the same paper printed an urgent appeal to its two million readers not to allow England to be made away with.

The whole of the English Press took up the cry; and the Press of the rest of the world after it. Under the heading of "*The Impending Supremacy of the Vegetable. Will Man Succumb?*"—one influential weekly journal described the Onion as having been regarded hitherto as a comic vegetable—a distinction which it shared with the Banana. With what irony, then, did we find the Comic impinging upon the Tragic! The Socratic paradoxical dictum that the Comic *is* the Tragic, and vice versa, was never more fully illustrated than by this latter-day *contretemps*.—And so on. . . .

It seemed that the cornucopia of Plenty contained only vituperation directed against poor Professor Herrey. He was the man to blame for the whole dangerous, impossible situation. Public opinion reviled him. It became increasingly unsafe for him to walk abroad unattended by a couple of policemen. The one-time favourite of the world was tasting now—in company with all such favourites that had ever lived—the bitter flavour of public hatred. He became morose. He ceased to leave his house so often. Then his goings-out became rare. Finally, they ceased altogether.

One morning his housekeeper found him dead in his library: a bullet in his temple, a revolver clutched in his hand. . . .

That November, all over the country, his effigy was burnt amid the snapping of crackers, the spluttering of catherine-wheels and the flaring of coloured lights, in place of the outmoded Guy Fawkes. . . .

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Meanwhile, the Press, led by the indefatigable *Morning Express*, continued its policy of alarming the people of England to take some action—with its characteristic, and appropriate, fury. The effect of this insistent propaganda was to summon Parliament abruptly, and rather unkindly, from its recess, to debate the matter.

It decided, in the course of time, that the Great Onion must, yes, be destroyed. There remained, truly, no other alternative. . . .

A Committee of Experts—created to go into the means of effecting the desired end—agreed on mining the Onion thoroughly with T.N.T.

The work was put in hand immediately. . . .

Several months later, the task completed, it was thought fitting that the King should, by throwing an electric switch, demolish the menace, and restore the world to its pre-Onion peace, and its old Seven-Wonders-ism once more.

The King, before accomplishing the act, read a long speech (prepared for him by that curious branch of the Civil Service whose duty it is to supply the Royal Family with speeches) into a microphone (disguised by the Broadcasting Corporation for the occasion with tastefully arranged flowers) so that the whole world heard that “By the grace of God, it is our duty to defend the Empire. . . . Therefore, we, in this faith, etc., etc. God does not will it—our Parliament, and our loyal subjects, do not intend it—that we allow this threatened encroachment of the Vegetable Kingdom on the Animal. . . . Hitherto, etc., . . . etc. . . . Therefore, we—sure in the knowledge that what we do can only lead to a tightening of the bonds of Empire, to the stronger linking of all peoples in common brotherhood each to each, and to cementing yet closer our



## *The Great Onion*

cherished regard for our people—do now depress this switch,” etc., etc. . . .

But the Committee of Experts had, in their deliberations, overlooked two important things resulting from their recommendations.

The use of several hundred thousand tons of such powerful explosive as T.N.T., not only successfully disposed of the Great Onion, but as successfully disposed of the Island of Larindia, in its entirety.

The other unexpected—but very obvious—result was the terrible death-roll that ensued. The odour, consequent upon disintegration, swept in a violet-coloured cloud over the Atlantic : impenetrable and undissolving ; greater in its density and intensity of destruction than any of the War gases. All the shipping that came in its way fell its victims ; and, reaching America eventually, but now gradually beginning to weaken through absorption by the air, it continued its dreadful depredations for three days, before it was ultimately dissipated.



## *The Birds*



## *The Birds*

WHEN Medena entered the long room, Rallardo rose quickly and bowed.

"All is still well?" asked Medena.

"All is well, my lord," replied Rallardo.

"And the horses?" Medena went to the window, and drew aside the stiff purple curtains.

"They will be here in an hour."

"What? Not for an hour?"

But he knew it was impossible to obtain them under an hour. He waved a hand.

"Time is very precious, Rallardo."

"Very precious, my lord."

"And my enemies—who knows?—even now may be at the gates."

Rallardo shrugged.

"The flight has been secret, my lord. None in the city of Lempala thinks other than that you are still in Lempala."

"You've a simple mind, Rallardo! My enemies are many; and now that the Council of Twenty is turned against me, my hours of freedom, if not of life, are indeed few. For the Council know everything; and such a small matter as my flight, I fear, will not present any difficulty to it."

Who should know the full power of the Council better than he—who had, up to a week ago, been its First Member?

"Ah, Rallardo," murmured Medena, "you do not

## *Two and Two Make Five*

know Pentinna! He will not rest until he has settled his old account with me." A rage rose in his heart. "Pentinna, always Pentinna! Standing in my path: opposing, forbidding me! He hates me, Rallardo. You don't know how he hates me. If he were here now, if I had him in this room, I'd kill him, with these hands. What a joy! What a joy! With these hands! . . ." He threw the purple curtains apart violently.

"Look you, Rallardo. It is close indoors. I shall go out into the garden. Burn yonder pile of papers, and secure this bundle in a case; for we take it with us."

He passed out into the garden. The summer sky arched scintillant with stars. Along the path the heat had bowed the roses and the dahlias. The flowering nallia had scattered its scorched petals; the winburlin drooped its white-and-yellow cascade wearily. A moth fluttered silently by. The trees brooded secretly. A languid night indeed: breathless in the embrace of the most passionate of the Seasons. . . .

Medena walked slowly: his thoughts bitter. So long had he dominated the country, how should he have dreamed of falling? He had been careless. O, fool that he was! Careless! . . . All the time he had been aware of Pentinna, of Pentinna's hatred, of Pentinna's planning. But that the man had planned so much, or so deeply! That he had gained, to such extent, the trust of the Council, the love of the people! . . . O, fool, fool! And again: fool! Pentinna should have been removed: killed. . . . Well, too late now. And useless to look back. . . . The only thing for the present was: flight, exile. Then: a little patience; a little waiting for the right moment—then a sudden, quick blow—sure disposal of Pentinna and his sup-

## *The Birds*

porters—and : return to power again. . . . O, it would be done ! Revenge would be good. Lord once more of Lempala. . . .

He made his way back to the house. As he mounted the steps to the terrace, a peacock passed slowly by : cumbered with its magnificence.

As he entered the room, he said :

“ Rallardo ”. . . .

Then he broke off, and stood motionless by the stiff purple curtains.

For Rallardo was lying face downward in the centre of the room, his arms bent under his body. And it was plain to see that . . .

A small, but sharp, prick at his left breast, caused Medena to break his tense attitude. And there, close at his breast, a dagger, held unflinchingly by a firm hand, extended from the folds of the purple curtain. . . .

And then, suddenly, the long room became crowded with men. They emerged from behind screens, from behind hangings, from behind the furniture. Their swords were drawn, and flashed coldly in the candle-light.

“ By Order of the Council of Twenty, you are my prisoner, Medena.”

A stroke of the sword, and Medena’s belt with its dagger and sword fell clanging on the tiled floor.

“ Where are you taking me ? ” inquired Medena.

“ To Lempala.”

Back to Lempala.

“ Ah ! To appear before the Council ? ”

“ It is Pentinna’s command.”

And they led him outside : under the starred sky, through the heat-worn garden. Down the long path, where bowed the roses and the dahlias. Past the glowing, de-petalled nallia, and the drooped winburlin.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Through the shrubbery, to the river. There a barge waited, and they boarded it, and moved slowly with the tide towards the city. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

But the Council was merciful.

Pentinna, now First Member, said :

“Medena, you have made many harsh laws, and treated the people shamefully. There has long been an outcry against you ; and doubtless you knew that the time would come when words would not be enough, and when action would supplant them.

“It is the wish of the people that you be cast from office ; and it is the Council’s duty to bring about the people’s wishes always. We have considered, too, whether you should die ; but have agreed to let you live. Therefore, you will be prisoner of the Council, in the castle of Warama . . .”

But Medena was amazed. That he was granted his life ! His heart leapt. Imprisonment : there was hope ! He had friends. They would work for him. O hope, indeed ! . . . The wish of the people ? Pah ! The people altered their herd-mind every day. They hated him at present, did they ? Why, to-morrow they’d be loving him. . . . Now : a little patience, a little waiting for the right moment. Then : the sudden, quick blow ! Revenge ! Pentinna disposed of ; the return to power : he would be lord once more of Lempala. . . .

Pentinna made a gesture with his hand, and Medena was taken away.

\* \* \* \* \*

Very beautiful was the Castle of Warama. Its masons, drawn from the surrounding villages and hamlets, had not lived in close communion with the country-



## *The Birds*

side for nothing : watching the continuous procession of the Seasons work each its will with the familiar scene. Slowly the castle was raised ; and when it was finished, it stood like an exquisite great grey flower on the little plain in the midst of the densely-wooded hills. Almost the stone of it sang : it was so perfect ! And surely, had there been one in the world, a blundering giant had sought to pluck the blossom of it to place in his button-hole, and take its perfume at leisure. . . .

So, very beautiful was the Castle of Warama : remote in the quietness of the northern country. . . . But the room to which Medena was brought was not beautiful. It was large enough truly ; but the ceiling was low, the floor flagged and carpetless, and the grated window too small to allow the passage of much light. Medena had shivered slightly on entering. Then he had walked up and down, and up and down till he was tired—then had slept. Late in the night he awoke with a wild cry on his lips. He had dreamed of his hands being about Pentinna's throat ; and he had strained with all his strength, till Pentinna grew limp and heavy and motionless. Then he had thrown the hated body down, and stamped his heel again and again on the twisted face. . . . Such thoughts marched insistently through Medena's brain. And others with them. Hatred sprang like a fountain from the depths of his being, and threw up its vicious jets : plans of revenge—to be carried out when his friends had achieved their purpose, when the people had forgotten their fear of him and all their distrust, when they were brought to the pitch of wanting him back ; when he was freed. . . . Then : the Council that had condemned him. Each face of the Twenty was sharp in his memory. Each of the Twenty would die. But Pentinna should not die easily. Oh no. . . . What sweetness : dealing with them ! Putting them from him : one by

## *Two and Two Make Five*

one. Ignoring their speeches, their prayers, their promises. Spitting on them, spitting. . . .

Always these thoughts: holding him with their violence and strength. . . .

And the flame of his soul burnt low—burnt no larger nor brighter than the flame of a candle. . . .

It was not until the sixth day that he went to the window, and looked out. A green lawn sloped away; on each side a bank of flowers; and at the far end: a park. The West sky. The sun, large and mellow, just sinking.

Medena stared.

On the lawn, a bird was hopping: its yellow beak every now and then swording among the grass-blades. It was joined by another bird. They hopped together: beaks busy. Presently, a flutter—and three more. Then: much chatter, beginning slowly and spasmodically, and rising in volume and gaining in speed. Sudden climax! a fluttering of wings—and they were all gone. . . .

The sun sank. A single, large white cloud drifted slowly over the blue, and passed: like a lace mantle snatched from white shoulders by the mischievous hands of a wind. . . .

For some moments, Medena gazed at that part of the lawn where the birds had been. Then, as the boldest stars appeared—spies of the oncoming army—he turned away.

The next morning, Medena was early at the window.

The dew was still on the grass, and the first beams of the sun were striking it all to a sparkle. Down in the park, among the heavy-foliaged trees, the slender-footed deer were browsing.

Medena turned away, vaguely disappointed. He

## *The Birds*

questioned his feeling. He had expected—well, what had he expected? Something. And it wasn't there. . . .

He paced the uneven flagging. And the wheel of his thoughts was back at its old revolutions. Pentinna, and the Council of Twenty; and the day that would come—the day that was coming—when he would be free again, the First Member, and,—suddenly, he was back again at the window, gripping the bars.

Birds: on the lawn. A dozen, twenty! Hopping; darting; shaking their wings; settling their plumage; rustling the grass till it dewed them—and they all noisy the while.

Medena was seeing birds for the first time since the days of his boyhood. Somehow, as he had grown up, he had come to forget them. Look at them now! The ways they had! The voices! To think, that for so long, he had looked at them, and heard them, and never realized. . . .

He stood—gripping the bars.

And the flame of his soul leapt up, increasing in brightness. . . .

After that, he was often at the window; and he loved the birds. What else had he for company? The lawn sloping, with its attendant banks of flowers, down to the park; and in the park, now and then a glimpse of the deer. Farther away, on either side, the hills, robed and crowned—like kings—with their woods. The sky always changing: now delicate, then heavy, from grey to rose, from blue to white, purple to palest green. Dark, dark, and the little pools of the stars. The wandering moon: now whole and yellow like a new-minted coin; now worn like an old one; now like a half-closed eye, bright before it utterly be eclipsed; and now thin like a silver bow. . . .

## *Two and Two Make Five*

These, all these—but so far away.

But—the birds! The gay, hopping, skipping, fluttering, singing birds! How he loved them! He felt lonely no longer. What a difference they made! . . .

One morning, late in the Autumn, he waited in vain at his window. What had happened to them all? If only they knew how eagerly he looked forward to their coming! He called softly through the bars: “Where are you, you happy things? Why don’t you come to the long lawn to-day? Why don’t you hurry and gladden me? . . .”

And he stood, looking to left and right, and looking to the sky.

A swallow nesting in the eaves of the turret above heard Medena’s cry; and as Medena turned back to his chair, it left its nest, and rose, and passed over the castle, and soon was lost beyond the hills.

Less than an hour later, a sudden soft commotion broke on the air. It sounded like the falling of rain. But it was not rain. The window was momentarily darkened; and Medena sprang up. The lawn was scattered with birds! Little and large: brilliant and drab—hundreds! And more in the air: hovering, settling, poisoning. The colour: eager, swift! They looked like flowers a-wing. . . . And the song! A blending babel! Short notes and long; deep and high; sad and happy; quick and slow. . . . Some of the birds stood still; some darted this way and that; others remained alone; others again gathered into clusters. . . .

Medena stood motionless at the window. And his gratitude and love dropped a sweet heat on the long-hard bud of his heart, and the bud unfolded—he felt it! timidly at first, then more surely—petal by petal, and emitted a strange, wonderful perfume which rose till it

## *The Birds*

mist-like enfolded his thoughts, and freed the grey, heavy tears from the prisons of his eyes. . . .

And the flame of his soul soared to a splendour. . . .

After that, there were always birds. By day: gambolling on the lawn; darting among the flowers; careering over the trees and bushes; sweeping down the white air; or climbing the winds to the places of the clouds. And always singing. . . . At evening: the sad-sweet song of the blackbird: from the topmost twig of a tree; or from some dizzy peak of the castle. . . . By night: the mysterious owls, calling from thicket to thicket. Curlews: weird cries from their secret dells in the hills. And nightingales: from park and wood, throwing their nets of passion on the thrilled air, and drawing in an enchanted silence. . . .

"What can I do? To repay you? I want to do something—to show you, let you know——" Medena was always wondering what he could do. There were the birds giving him freely of all their beauty of shape and song, day and night; and he returning them nothing. . . . Surely there was something he could do? Not now; not yet; but later—when he was free, and had power in his land again. Power. A Maker of laws. . . . Why! A law! A law to help birds! And he thought. . . . Impose a penalty of death on anyone who wantonly destroyed one of them. A heavy penalty! But not too heavy. . . . No! . . . He was at the window—and there on the long lawn: the birds! . . . No; not too heavy a penalty. . . . And he vowed: when he was freed and returned to power, he would make the Law. Nothing should stop him. He would override all objection to it—and force its observance. He could do no less. To prove his gratitude; and love. . . .

That night word was brought to him secretly that

## *Two and Two Make Five*

already the public mind was changing: veering towards him again. His sympathizers were gaining in number and influence; and soon a blow would be struck—for a plan had been prepared. If all went well, his escape from prison would be effected, the overthrow of the Council of Twenty accomplished, and his return to Lempala would be—after entering the city gates—a triumphal progress. Pentinna, of course, would have been——

And Medena tightened his lips, and half-closed his eyes, and wrote a brief reply: "On your life, keep Pentinna unharmed until I come."

\* \* \* \* \*

Lempala, again! From the city gates to the palace: banners overhead, flowers underfoot, and a shouting people around.

A day of wild greeting. A holiday. And in the night: a banquet. Music and laughter. . . . Eventually, Medena withdrew. Headiest and sweetest of all the wines he had drunk: the wine of freedom. He withdrew; and with him went his chief friends. For there was much to consider and plan. . . .

The same week, a quick death was meted out to the fallen Council of Twenty; but a slow death to Pentinna.

"And now," said Medena, when they brought him word ultimately of Pentinna's end, "at last I feel truly free." . . .

As they had brought him away from the Castle of Warama, he had drawn aside and spoken for some moments with Deneffa.

"This has been a black time, Deneffa. Held here so long between four walls. I've chafed, and been—like a caged beast. But you don't know! If it hadn't

## *The Birds*

have been for the birds—they came always to the lawn beneath my window, day and night—I would have gone mad. O, long ago! But they sang—such sweetness and purity—and spread their feathers, glowed in the sun!—and they kept me sane, healed the wounds in me. I've sworn to repay them. By making a law, to protect them. And now—I can do it. It'll be the first thing. I'll put it before everything else." . . .

But the days passed over: flipped, like the pages of a book, by the regular hand of Time. There was so much to consider, so much work, so many meetings.

During the first week, Medena thought often of the law. But no sooner would he start to make notes, or deliberate deeply in connexion with it, than an interruption would occur. A pressing matter would demand attention, or his presence be desired at a meeting. It was the same during the second week. And during the third. . . .

After the first month, he ceased to think often of the law. The swift rushing tide of affairs poured over the intention and submerged it.

Deneffa approached him once, curiously.

"My lord, am I mistaken? You mentioned something to me once of a law you intended to make. A law for birds." . . .

"Ah," said Medena, and dropped the net of memory into the past. Presently, Deneffa eyeing him, he drew it in. "Yes. I had intended, as you say, to make such a law. But I don't think now that I shall. One alters, Deneffa. The loneliness at Warama—day after day, night after night—the loneliness. I became emotional. Womanish, Deneffa. You understand? And I thought foolish things—crazy like a poet, or a wordless dreamer. . . . And now, there's much to do of importance. You know it. And so little time. Things so urgent!

## *Two and Two Make Five*

I'm stronger now ; I'm well again. So we'll forget about the law, we'll forget. . . . And you can laugh at me, if you like, Deneffa—laugh at the Medena that used to be, the Medena planning a 'Thank-you to birds.' . . .

And he sent Deneffa away. But Deneffa did not laugh.

And the flame of Medena's soul shrank slowly in size and brightness. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

In the Summer, Medena left Lempala, and took up residence in his country house at Narra. Shortly after, it was Deneffa who approached him, and said : "My lord. A strange thing. Have you noticed ? There is not a bird on the whole of the estate. I have looked. In the orchard ; the shrubbery ; in the lower gardens ; the woods ; the fields. Not a bird, my lord."

Medena walked to the window in silence. Presently he turned to Deneffa and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"This is excellent news. Excellent ! To think my fruit will ripen this year unspoiled."

"But people are talking, my lord. The peasantry : they are saying.—Well——" Deneffa pursed his lips, in a difficulty.

"Tell me, what are they saying ?" said Medena sharply, dropping his hand.

"My lord, they don't like it. They're afraid. They don't understand it. There's evil somewhere they say."

Medena turned back to the window. Deneffa came closer.

"Some time ago, my lord, you spoke of a law. A plan of protection for birds. Then you changed your mind, and threw away the idea. . . . I've wondered,



## *The Birds*

my lord, whether the going of the birds from the estate hasn't conceivably something to do with your abandoning the idea."

He looked anxiously at Medena, who smiled slowly.

"Indeed, my dear Deneffa, I declare you are becoming extraordinarily like the peasantry: superstitious and crude. Do not, I beg of you, continue in such wise. Believe me, it is not really very entertaining."

And he dismissed Deneffa, who went uneasily.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lempala was known throughout the land as the City of Squares. There were so many of them: little and large; some paved with coloured marbles and set with statuary and fountains; many park-like; but most gay with numerous plots of flowers.

Without exception, they were the abiding-place of hosts of sparrows and pigeons. The city folk loved to bring bread and crumble it there, and the sparrows would twitter and peck the crumbs from their outstretched hands, and the pigeons flutter skilfully about them and alight on their shoulders or arms. . . .

Medena crossing one of the smaller of the squares, towards evening, was making his way to a gathering of the Country Councillors, at which he was to outline his new policy.

Strong coercion used by his friends early in the afternoon had roused his anger and wounded his pride; and a growing suspicion of the infidelity of two of them had started fear in his heart. He realized how precarious was his position. To win to power was not enough, one had to fight to retain it. And with every nerve and muscle. Well, he had fought in the past—he would go on fighting. He would take his own way, and force

## *Two and Two Make Five*

others along with him. . . . He clenched his teeth till his lips were a white line of grimness.

There were a dozen or so people near the central fountain feeding the birds as usual; but Medena was blind to them. He hastened on, and his quick gait frightened the birds: they took to wing with a sudden confusion. Up swept the cloud of them, and round, over his head. At once, with a start of red anger, Medena lifted his heavy stick and swung it down cuttingly through the bronze cloud. Two fluttering shapes fell abruptly and lay still. A tremulous shout welled from the people—and a man rushed up.

“But—it’s Medena!” he fell back abashed.

The people shed their menace at once, and gathered back.

“Medena! . . .”

And Medena hastened on—flinging his cloak closer about him; with the soul of him drawn to the feebleness of a rush-light.

\* \* \* \* \*

The same evening, Medena suddenly disappeared. It was very mysterious. The house was searched at once, and the garden. Messengers were sent to Lempala, but returned without any news. There were many conjectures and fears. But everyone was at a loss. The gardeners set out later to search the park. It was a calm night, with the moon like a great flower, and a few stars like bees that had culled its honey and were making off silver-dusty. . . .

Deneffa went with the gardeners.

And it was Deneffa, who, coming to the edge of a wide glade in the midst of the park, stopped of a sudden and stood motionless with horror.

There, in the middle of the glade lay inert—who else

## *The Birds*

but Medena? on his breast two vultures tearing with talons and beak, and in the air over him a crowd of the hideous birds, their wings sweeping the air with the sound of scythes in long grass.



*The Shop in the Off-Street*



## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

At first, Mr. Norman Beckett did not know that he had entered the wrong shop.

"I want a pair of boots," he said. "Size nine."

The man behind the counter nodded and smiled with pleasure.

"Certainly, certainly! . . . Now, let me see. We have three kinds."

He turned to a shelf, and took down a box.

"Number One; four leagues to a step. A nice boot. Very shapely. Will last a lifetime. Though, of course, so will they all, for that matter."

He turned and took down another box, producing a pair of top-boots.

"Number Two. Slightly heavier, you note. But then: they take eight leagues."

"Four leagues? Eight leagues?" Mr. Beckett groped.

The shopman nodded brightly, and took down a third box.

"But these—ah!" he said softly. "Look, aren't they beautiful?"

They were, indeed. The leather had the texture of a rose-petal; and, a black mirror, reflected Mr. Beckett's staring face with precision. Filagree work adorned the instep, delicate as a sixteenth-century goldsmith's (Mr. Beckett instantly compared the intricate leather designs with gold); and the laces were green and ended in a joyful tassel.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Twelve leagues," triumphed the shopman, sweeping the air with a proud arm.

"Twelve leagues?" stammered Mr. Beckett.

"To an inch," declared the man.

"To an inch," Mr. Beckett repeated helplessly.

"Now, which pair do you fancy? Perhaps it's difficult to decide?"

He touched Number Three caressingly. The touch clearly indicated to which pair Mr. Beckett should incline.

"You would like to try them on? Of course."

"I say," demanded Mr. Beckett, "what *is* this shop?"

The man looked up with a start.

"Don't you know?" he asked; and seemed to droop a little, as one droops on hearing ill-news.

Mr. Beckett looked around him.

"This is not a boot-shop," he accused. "I want a bootshop."

"No, not entirely a boot-shop," propitiated the man.

"Though, as you see, we have a certain small selection of boots. . . . We stock all magic goods—a complete assortment. Didn't you know?"

"I didn't," stated Mr. Beckett, edging towards the door. "Do you really?"

The man must be mad.

"Also, this is the only entrance to Faeryland in the city."

"Indeed?" The door was a long way off. Should he make a dash for it?

"The boots I just showed you are magic boots, my dear sir," went on the other. "We are in a position to supply you with anything; and, of course, no charge."

"Eh, no charge?" The man certainly must be mad!

"None, I assure you. . . . To tell the truth, you are the first person to enter our shop for many months.



## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

People simply won't believe the sign outside, and it's quite plain. You didn't see it?" he asked wistfully.

Mr. Beckett shook his head.

"I'll have a look."

And he went outside. On a swinging-board was the legend:

FAERYLAND:  
ENTRANCE  
(Sole one in the  
Metropolitan Area).

---

COMPLETE STOCK  
OF MAGIC GOODS.

He hesitated. Certainly the words were plain enough. No gainsaying that. Perhaps the man wasn't mad, after all? Well, the world was full of queer things, and sometimes one stumbled on one of them. The only reason for scepticism lay in the fact that the city was London. Had it been Constantinople, or Paris, or Budapest, the circumstance would have been understandable. But—London! . . . However . . . There was nothing against a little further investigation . . . He went back to the waiting shopman.

"Yes, it seems all right," he conceded, grudgingly. The man smiled.

"Occasionally, children come in, you know. But grown-ups—never. We see them pass by. They look in at the door amusedly: shrug their shoulders, and laugh. Somehow, they naturally mistrust the truth. They're so extraordinary." . . .

He became brisk again.

"Now, about the boots. . . ."

But Mr. Beckett shook his head.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Of course, delightful to take eight or twelve leagues to a step," he said politely. But he was thinking of other things. Anything he wanted, eh? "Complete stock of Magic Goods"? . . . There had been so many things in a magical way he'd wanted—since nursery days. Well, which thing especially?

"No, not boots," he said. "Not boots to-day," he added, seeing the shopman's drooped look. A sensitive creature, evidently. Mustn't hurt his feelings too much.

"And they're beautiful boots," he enthused cheerfully.

"Ah, as you say." The man reluctantly put them back in their boxes. A last caress to the rose-petal of Number Three. . . .

Then Mr. Beckett decided.

"I say! I've always wanted to fly: have wings, you know—go flying about like a bird . . ."

"Wings?" repeated the man. "Certainly, we can do that. It's in another department, though. Come this way."

He led Mr. Beckett towards a door at the end of the shop; still in the drooped manner that touched Mr. Beckett's conscience. Something more should be said.

"I'm awfully sorry about the boots. Some other day, perhaps."

"Don't mention it." The man seemed to revive. He even smiled as he opened the door. "There. Just go through."

A little man came forward, rubbing his hands together.

"Sir?" he enquired, with a suave inclination of his body from the hips.

Mr. Beckett described his need, and the little man listened carefully.

"Very easy," he nodded, at the end of the recital; and he stretched out both hands in an abstracted sort of way. Instantly a note-book appeared in his left hand,

## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

and a pencil in his right. He started to make notes. Mr. Beckett noticed that the pencil was a white lead one; and produced on the white of the paper, a delicate gold lettering.

"Of course," said the little man at length, looking up; "Of course, you can't fly in the world."

"Where else can I, then?" asked Mr. Beckett, with some disappointment. He had had visions of fluttering playfully just above the traffic in the Strand, or circling around Piccadilly Circus, the delighted cynosure of incredulous eyes.

"Why, in Faeryland, of course," the little man replied. "You will readily understand that it would be impossible to mix up magic and things faery with the world." He raised his eyebrows.

Mr. Beckett reluctantly acknowledged the impossibility.

"Now, let us arrange the matter," proceeded the little man cheerfully. "What weight are you?"

"Eleven stone, six."

"And height?"

"Just six feet."

These facts were jotted down in the delicate gold lettering, and a slight calculation made.

"That means, then, a spread, in all, of twelve feet. Furled neatly, each wing will compress to your height, folding slightly across and down your back, to about your ankle. Yes."

He beamed, throwing out his hands modestly.

"Quite simple, you see."

Mr. Beckett was becoming excited. He beamed generously in response.

"It's very wonderful!"

"Tut," deprecated the other. "Now, there's another point. You will understand, too, of course, how

## *Two and Two Make Five*

undesirable it would be for you to disappear from the world of a sudden—and then reappear as suddenly. . . .”

“My goodness, I hadn’t thought of that!”

“Ah! . . . You would, probably, have some trouble in explaining your absence. If you were to tell the truth, people most certainly would not believe you.”

“They’d think I was mad.”

“Quite so. Curious mentality they have. . . . But we can overcome the difficulty. We are prepared for all contingencies, likely and unlikely, but we specialize in the unlikely.” He spoke with pride. “We propose, then, to create a substitute to take your place in the world: he will be, needless to say, an exact replica in looks and physique; and will come and go, and perform all duties and act in your stead.”

It sounded both ingenious and competent to Mr. Beckett.

The little man lifted a curtain, revealing a doorway.

“This way. To the Cutting-Out Department.”

A thin man advanced smoothly towards them, and bowed gravely to Mr. Beckett.

“Quite, quite,” he murmured. “A substitute. . . .”

“I shall leave you, now,” said the little man who had escorted Mr. Beckett. “I have to select the right wings,” he nodded vaguely towards the door behind him. “Everything, I am sure, will be all right. . . . A happy flight!”

And he was gone.

The thin man meanwhile had wheeled up a large easel, and pinned a length of drawing-paper to a board. Having lifted the board on to the easel, he turned about.

“Stand quite still, if you please,” he requested; and took a piece of charcoal in hand. The only sounds for the next few moments were Mr. Beckett’s breathing and the gentle rasping of the charcoal against the paper.

## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

Then suddenly the thin man remarked: "I think that's all right." . . . He stepped back, head critically on one side: now eyeing the drawing, and now Mr. Beckett. "Yes, quite," he decided.

Mr. Beckett took it that he might relax his tense position. He did so, accordingly, and moved to the easel to inspect.

"My goodness!" he said, and stared.

The thin man rightly construed the ejaculation as praise, and even flushed a trifle. To cover his pleasure, he hastened to unpin the paper.

"Now, the scissors, the scissors," he said, as though slightly flurried. But they were in his hand all the time. Soon the life-size drawing was cut out, and was lying on the floor for all the world like a strange detached shadow.

The thin man bent over it, and began to croon sibilantly. And as he crooned, the shadow gradually swelled from end to end—exactly, Mr. Beckett thought, like a bicycle tube being pumped up. Abruptly the little man ceased to croon, and clapped his hands once sharply. Immediately the figure sprang up, and was standing on its feet—and Mr. Beckett, with a mixed assemblage of feelings, was fronting himself. Perhaps embarrassment was chief of his emotions. Such a situation! What did one say to one's self? Must say something! . . . Grinning absurdly, he advanced towards the other Mr. Beckett. As he advanced, it advanced, grinning too.

"Well," he began.

"Well," it said.

"It's going to be fine, this flying," he continued.

"It's going to be fine, this flying," it echoed.

How silly: repeating his words! His embarrassment increased. However:

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"It's all—extraordinary, and thrilling!" he tried again.

"It's all—extraordinary, and thrilling!" it parroted.

Mr. Beckett turned impatiently. It turned, too. . . .

"Of course," said the thin man, intervening. "being yourself, the Substitute can only say what you say, and do what you do—whilst you are together here. But when it's out in the world—it'll be different."

Oh, so that was the explanation! Mr. Beckett faced his self with a smile.

It met him, smiling.

"Ah!" he said, knowingly—and winked.

"Ah!"—the same intonation; a wink.

The thin man took it by the hand, and led it towards the door.

Mr. Beckett couldn't resist crying out: "Good-bye!"

"Good-bye!" it answered. . . .

Back came the thin man bearing a long, narrow box.

"Here we are," he said. "The wings."

And there they were, emerged from their many wrappings—black and green and gold—the most beautiful things.

"I say," Mr. Beckett, stroking the sheeny softness, felt a sudden horrible doubt: "Shall I be able to manage them all right?"

"O, it's quite easy," assured the thin man. "Once they're on, you'll find it as natural as walking."

He commenced attaching them to Mr. Beckett's tingling shoulders. All that beauty of black and green and gold!—he felt like a peacock.

"What about your hat?" enquired the thin man.

"Won't you leave it?"

But Mr. Beckett clutched firmly at his bowler.

"No. I'll keep it on."

He felt that, amid all the wonder and marvel of the

## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

adventure of flying about in Faeryland, the company of his bowler—comforting badge of twentieth-century respectability—was imperative.

“But I’ll leave my cane and chamois gloves,” he conceded. . . .

The thin man threw open a wide door, and waved a hand.

“Faeryland,” he said.

Mr. Beckett took a deep breath at the sight.

“I—say!” he stammered.

He crossed the threshold, and the wide door closed behind him. . . . Under a blossom-heavy tree, a dozen or so little people were dancing. Their laughter sounded like delicate, distant bells. . . . A little stream, hard-by, issuing from a fern-gay nook, sang a low song, whose words and melody made Mr. Beckett’s heart leap lightly, and all care fall from it. . . . And as he stood, a honeyed wind, more sweet than all the mixed sweets of Araby, called to him, challenging him to a race to the first pink cloud in the sky.

“Right!” And Mr. Beckett, accepting the challenge—with a mighty flap, launched himself exultantly into the air. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

On the evening of his return to the boarding-house, Mr. Beckett felt a little self-conscious. According to the calendar he had been away fifteen days; though in Faeryland, it had seemed but a long golden afternoon. He had flown experimentally and exploringly till he had grown tired; then had returned to the wide door. The thin man had admitted him to the shop, and he had discarded his wings.

“A wonderful few hours!” he had declared.

“Ah, a little longer than that—according to earth-

## *Two and Two Make Five*

time," said the thin man, packing the black and green and gold away in their box. "Let me see," and he had produced a calendar. "Fifteen days, really," he astonished Mr. Beckett.

"Goodness! fifteen days."

So, entering the dining-room under the austere eye of Mrs. Higgs, his landlady, he felt quite a little self-conscious. Had his real absence been noticed? Had the substitute carried off the deception? How completely? Had it failed in any important, if minor, details?

Meeting the austere eye flashed coldly by Mrs. Higgs, he quailed inwardly—but needlessly.

"Good evening, Mr. Beckett," she douched, quite as usual.

One was always chilled by Mrs. Higgs's remarks. Conversation with her was impossible.

Mr. Beckett mumbled the appropriate greeting, and seated himself in his accustomed chair next to Miss March. Of Miss March, he had once remarked epigrammatically to his brother (now in India) "What is she like? Well, bronze hair and a brazen air describes her." And it did, with the utmost precision and thoroughness.

The soup was brought in. So lukewarm, that it was an affair of the utmost energy to consume it before it became completely cold; and so shallow, that the whole process of partaking seemed to consist in ducking one's head rhythmically, the while executing a tattoo with the spoon upon the plate. The few mouthfuls of liquid seemed always, to Mr. Beckett, a most inadequate reward for one's ingenious performance. . . . At the end of the soup, Miss March turned with a, "Good evening, Mr. Beckett," and a smile that, for some moments after Mr. Beckett's polite reply, lingered



### *The Shop in the Off-Street*

pleasantly. But Mr. Beckett did not begin a conversation—for the roast mutton arrived at that moment; and Mrs. Higgs's roast mutton always made the heaviest demands upon one's concentration. The invariable accompaniments were sprouts and potatoes. This course was known of old to Mr. Beckett. The task in hand became automatically one of separation and elimination. From the mutton: gristle, fat and obscure bones. From the sprouts: black and withered outer leaves; and from the potatoes: overlooked "eyes" and mysterious (and extraordinarily hard) lumps. . . . Conversation was impossible, in such circumstances, to the earnest and determined diner. All very well for a person like Mr. Tobins opposite, who merely filled his mouth, and, continuing his descant, splashed the vicinity. Or like Miss Tregenna—who had so capacious a mouth it was more like a wallet: her voice came clearly and indefatigably from the midst, as though in the wallet existed a gramophone. . . . Mr. Beckett, having on the one hand, neither the perspicacity of a Mr. Tobins, nor, on the other, the capacity of a Miss Tregenna—was satisfied to remain silent. . . .

The stewed fruit and custard was an easy matter. Conversation, combined with elegance, became a possibility. Miss March, spoon suspended, little finger wide-outstretched, leaned suddenly towards Mr. Beckett, and in a lowered voice asked: "Did you really mean what you said this morning?"

Mr. Beckett, startled, glanced quickly at the red-brown eyes. What had he said? Why, nothing! He hadn't been here! Ah, the Substitute!

"Er . . . this morning?" Confound it all! He'd have to go carefully. Mustn't put his foot in it. Whatever had the Substitute said? He fumbled with his napkin.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Rather!" he said, heartily, at last.

The answer seemed to satisfy her. She continued with the spoon. . . .

Mr. Beckett breathed again, and folded his napkin hurriedly.

As he rose, Miss March looked at him, from under half-lowered lids—a somewhat needlessly involved way of looking at him, he thought. It made him feel a trifle fearful, a feeling he easily threw off as he tramped upstairs to his room, his cherry-wood depending lightly from his mouth, and drawing perfectly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Ah, the boots?" suggested the shopman, hopefully.

"No, not to-day. Wings again," said Mr. Beckett apologetically: and passed down the shop to the door at the end. On going through, the little man advanced as before, rubbing his hands together.

"Good morning!" he greeted, performing the suave inclination of his body from the hips.

"Wings again," repeated Mr. Beckett cheerfully.

"Good!" smiled the little man. "This way."

Beyond the door, hidden by the curtain, waited the thin man.

"It is most satisfactory to us," said he, approaching smoothly and making his grave bow, "when our customers return."

Shortly, the substitute was crooned and clapped to life. Mr. Beckett, still with some slight embarrassment, looked at it curiously.

"You gave me an awkward moment, you know," he admonished; "with Miss March."

It repeated the admonition.

"How useless!" said Mr. Beckett.

"How useless!" it agreed.

## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

Then the thin man came up with the long narrow box, which he put down carefully; and the Substitute was led to the door, and sent into the world.

"Now, here we are," he said, returning.

And there were the wings as before: black and green and gold. And when they were firmly attached to Mr. Beckett's shoulders, he felt again a veritable peacock!

The wide door was thrown open—and he stepped out into the glory. As he did so, three figures, half-cherub, half-butterfly, swooped down from the tower of a long-fronded tree, and circled over his head—calling to him. And Mr. Beckett, with a mighty flap, launched himself exultantly into the air. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

"Norman. . . ." said Miss March.

He started. His christian name! . . . They were alone in the sitting-room; with all Mrs. Higgs's photographically-enlarged immediate ancestors ranged forbiddingly around.

"Norman," she continued, "what made you do it? You called me 'Miss March' at breakfast, and everyone noticed it. After all these weeks! What *will* they think? O why did you do it, why did you do it? That horrible Mr. Tobins whispered something to that dreadful Miss Tregenna, and they both looked at us. And Mrs. Higgs, too. . . ."

But Mr. Beckett's mind had suddenly become a roundabout. Queer snatches of quaint tunes rang through it—and it going round and round all the while at a giddy rate. . . .

"Norman?" the hurt pathetic voice pressed. The roundabout slowed down.

"I . . . I . . ." he stammered: but words were

## *Two and Two Make Five*

elusive little birds, and insisted on flying out of his reach. He snatched at five, with sudden cunning—and great success.

“I’m awfully sorry. Forgive me.”

And he was forgiven at once. . . . He left her as soon as he could, and sought out Mrs. Higgs.

“Mrs. Higgs,” he said rather breathlessly; “I’m sorry to have to leave you——”

“Indeed?” came the douche. “You are making a change?” The austere eye flashed at him.

“I am afraid I must,” Mr. Beckett stood his ground firmly. . . .

That afternoon he found another boarding-house, far removed from Mrs. Higgs’s, and thither moved all his effects with the utmost secrecy. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

On his way from the shop in the off-street to his boarding-house—after an absence from the world of five weeks to a day—Mr. Beckett was passing down Praed Street.

Miss March, standing in the midst of a pile of luggage, spied him from the opposite pavement—and dashed over, and clutched his arm.

“Oh, I’ve been so worried!” she cried.

Mr. Beckett groaned inwardly. That he should have the rotten luck to meet her again! What should he say? How get away from her? . . . He looked anxiously to right and left; then, hurriedly, at her. With rising consternation he saw she was about to weep. A tear or two trembled in her eyes. Just on the fall.

“I say, now, I say,” he blundered in the true male manner. . . .

But to his relief, she laughed the tears away.

## *The Shop in the Off-Street*

"You naughty boy," she scolded—but happily. "Leaving me just as we're starting our honeymoon. . . ."

Mr. Beckett blenched. His heart apparently stopped, then embarked on a staccato obligato. . . . His mind returned to its odd trick of imitating a decrepit roundabout. Away it wheezed, very swiftly and windily, and the quaint bursts of tune creaked out: now thin, now blaring. . . .

The Substitute had gone and married her! . . . Gone and married her! Gone and married her! . . .

The speed was settling, and slowing. The wind was calming. The tunes failing. Suddenly, all was still. Then Mr. Beckett thought hard. He refused to be a married man. He refused to be married to Miss March. He must escape. Get right away. Get to a place where she could never find him again. . . . That darned Substitute! . . . All right, then! Bright flared the idea of a sudden, and dazzled him. Back he'd go to Faeryland, and stay there, and die there; and leave the Substitute happily married. . . .

"There, now," he said. "There, now," soothingly. "Just wait here a moment. I'll be back in a trice. . . ."

"No, all the luggage is over there," she pointed across to the small knoll of it in the centre of the pavement, impeding the progress of earnest-minded pedestrians . . .

"Well, then. . . ." Such a detail! "Wait over there for me. . . . Only a moment, really . . . darling. . . ."

He took credit to himself for the vocal caress. His reward for it was a docile crossing of the street on her part, with a delicately-affectionate wave of the hand as she went. . . .

Back hurried Mr. Beckett to the shop in the off-street.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

The shopman lifted his eyebrows optimistically : then lowered them, and drooped perceptibly with his whole body, as, without a word, Mr. Beckett disappointed by rushing down to the end door, and passing through.

"Wings, wings!" he cried; and all the despairing importunity of the drowning man calling for a life-buoy was in his accents.

The little man ushered him in to the thin man's room.

"I'm never going back to the world," declared Mr. Beckett, as the Substitute leapt to its feet.

"You—messer, you! Go away!" he spluttered, half-serious, half-laughing.

It faced him with a like bearing.

"You—messer, you! Go away!"

Then the thin man led it out, and came back presently with the long, narrow box.

Out came all the splendour of green and black and gold.

"Ah, you don't know!" he said to the thin man. "What a muddle I'm in—outside." He nodded to the door through which the Substitute had gone. "So—I'll never go back again. Never. He's happy out there, and I'm happy here; so it's all right." . . .

The thin man didn't reply. He was intent on the fixing of the wings to Mr. Beckett's tingling shoulders.

"And as a proof"—said Mr. Beckett. He doffed his bowler hat, looked at it with a glance that held many feelings in solution—then flung it from him into the corner of the room.

It was a gesture : dramatic and fine.

Fully aware of holding for once, absolutely undisputed, the centre of the stage, Mr. Beckett advanced to the wide door.

The peacock that he felt!

### *The Shop in the Off-Street*

Moving smoothly and quietly, the thin man flung the door open, and Mr. Beckett stepped out immediately and, with a mighty flap, launched himself exultantly into the air. . . .





## *The Chimpanzee*

## ADVERTISEMENT

THE gentle reader will grant me indulgence: I have dared to add the burden of two new letters to the alphabet—which, designed solely for human usage, is not entirely adapted to chimpanzee-speech.

The two letters are  $\pi$  and  $\text{þ}$ ; their capitals respectively,  $\Pi$  and  $\text{Þ}$ ; and are, of course, unpronounceable by other than chimpanzees. By way of guide, however, it may be suggested that the  $\pi$  is as near as possible to the letters G and Q uttered in conjunction through mouth and nose simultaneously; and the  $\text{þ}$  is a moment-sustained combination of the bubbling guttural of a frog, and the sudden, sharp raucousness of a corncrake.

## *The Chimpanzee*

Just below the Equator, not far from where the Livingstone River skirts the suddenly-subsiding Levy Hills, lay the village of Tobbe: an untidy cluster of huts: unique in that it was the only white-inhabited village in that most central region of Africa—but, nevertheless, not to be envied on that account.

Kept, as it seemed, at an impatient distance by the snatched clearing wherein the village stood, chafed the jungle: portentous ever: ominous with its silence as with its noise: patently but temporarily deterred from indulging to the full its voracity—presently, shortly, it would consume the impertinent clearing, absorb the insulting huts. . . .

The sixty or seventy Europeans—English, Germans, Portuguese and Dutch—that composed Tobbe (with a like number of natives) had not with any great degree of willingness, it may properly be inferred, chosen it for residence. Its position, climate, and general conditions militated against its choice for any other than urgent politic reasons. A brief enquiry into the past activities of its inhabitants would have revealed just such urgent politic reasons; and ones likely to remain powerful enough to hold them from ever returning to their several countries again.

The chief preoccupation of everyone in Tobbe was, of course, whisky. But Mr. Stanley Chelson, while duly subscribing to it, subscribed with only the half of his attention; the other half he gave to his chimpanzee,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Teena. In the eleven years of his erratic-tempered, but painstaking, training, he had succeeded in endowing Teena with some semblance to a human being. In fact, with appreciably more semblance than one or two members of the community retained. It was not only that Teena dressed, slept and ate as a human, but also that he could fetch and carry, wash and dry dishes, sweep, and deliver messages, and so forth; and, crowning achievement of all! actually speak. It was this last accomplishment that was, by turns, Mr. Chelson's great joy and great sorrow. His joy because it was the realization of his life's one ambition; and his sorrow because quittance of Africa was unthinkable, and the deserved twin awards of fame and triumph, from the world in general, could never be his.

His success with Teena had been so complete: Teena! the first chimpanzee ever to talk. To think of the fortune that waited—accruing from exhibition of him in circus and music-hall! So within reach; so beyond grasp! . . .

Only a few days before had Mr. Chelson read in a three-months-old paper of a man with an acrobatic and juggling jaguar who was to be paid a thousand pounds a week for a world-tour. A thousand a week for that! Lord, what would they give, then, for a chimpanzee that talked?

"Ah!" he shouted suddenly.

He had crumpled up the paper with a violent hand, and, delivering at length his opinion on the ineradicable unfairness of life, had hurled a saucepan, with some accuracy of aim, at the generally-wary Teena—then subsided into a savage fit of melancholy.

His thoughts became unbearable. To check their sharpness and bitterness, he turned soon to whisky. To forget, to forget! . . . He drank hurriedly. . . .

## *The Chimpanzee*

The heavy, burning air pressed on him like an armour of heated leaden scales. Pressed, and seemed to reach through his flesh, into his very thoughts. God, to forget! All this mess . . . this unfairness . . . a thousand a week . . . this Tobbe; it was hell. . . . He was in hell already. . . .

"Here, you, Teena! Where are you? Show yourself——" He threw the nearest bottle. Teena dodged, but too slowly: the missile caught his shoulder, hurtled on, and smashed into tinkling pieces.

"You devil, you——!"

Mr. Chelson flung a cumbrous biscuit-tin, then a cup. . . .

Teena danced suddenly, stamping with his foot, and baring his teeth:

"Ĕkek! Ĕkek! Lapmah teep!"

The return to angry, hurt chimpanzee-language incensed Mr. Chelson beyond all control. He rushed forward, catching up a chair, intent suddenly on killing Teena.

"You miserable little brute! What're you saying? After all these years! Talk properly——!"

But Teena scrambled agilely around the table, and darted through the door, his voice becoming shrill:

"Pha xemp len arĥ pa! Ĕkek! . . ."

He made swiftly off towards the jungle.

Mr. Chelson dropped the chair; stood for a moment inclined to follow, then saw the folly of the plan, and made for the whisky-bottle again. . . .

Late that night, Teena returned to Tobbe. Accustomed to his master's invariable procedure on occasions such as the present, he did not expect to find other than the hut's interior in a state of chaos, and Mr. Chelson, oblivious and stertorous, somewhere in the midst.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

And it was so, once again.

Pausing for an instant on the threshold, Teena peered at the unlovely scene: the table, on its four crazy legs, a-tilt; its burden of bottles and glasses, matches, food, cigarettes and papers, scattered on the floor; most of the movable objects—chairs, bed-clothes, boxes and shelf-contents, apparently much exercised in their quality of movability—here and there, littered or piled, whole or broken; the candle guttered and extinct; and Mr. Chelson—arms limp, legs extended, head loosely rising and falling sunk chestwards: his body sprawling in the cane-chair—imminent on collapse to the floor.

It was all so familiar to Teena. Yet, as he stood, he felt a twitching of disgust under his skin, his eyes half closed, and his mouth opened slowly. He seemed to spit—hissing—his voice rising to a thin shrillness:

“Lhag na ðeph, ten ɹvent! Hanɹt—fal ðm!”

Abruptly he shook himself, ambled forward, and began tidying the hut. It took him an hour. Finally, he threw a blanket over his unconscious master, then crept into a corner, and waited for him to awaken.

This occurred shortly before noon; and it was a grim and taciturn, a shaky and aching Mr. Chelson that struggled from his chair, and lurched to the water-container. Observing Teena, he scowled, but said nothing; and it was not until the evening that he permitted a slight expression of his strange, but real, affection for the animal to be made in a brief couple of pats on the back. These sufficed for Teena, and he sprang clumsily about, washing and drying the dishes: singing in his rasping, guttural voice Mr. Chelson’s favourite ditty:

“Two women came to an inn, O,  
A night of pleasure to win, O” . . .

He hung the cups on their hooks; piled the plates;

## *The Chimpanzee*

then threw out the greasy water, and put the tin to drain on the floor.

“The men strode off with an ‘O, ho, ho!’  
But the women——”

“Shut up!”

Mr. Chelson had resumed his whisky. His old sense of grievance had slowly been mounting all the afternoon, and now, like a tide, was at the full. He was swallowing the raw spirit from a cracked tumbler greedily, as though, proffered to him, it might, in the caprice of an instant, be suddenly withdrawn. He had picked up the three-months-old paper again, and alighted upon the news of the juggling jaguar.

“Damn you, shut up!” he yelled again at the silent Teena. Then he pressed both hands to his head, and began rocking to and fro.

“O God, God!” he groaned. Tears streaked his face. “Teena, here, Teena,” he called all at once in a normal voice.

Teena whimpered.

“What do you want? What do you want me for?”

“Here, old boy. Come here.”

Teena drew unwillingly towards him, half fearfully. But Mr. Chelson looked at him from blood-shot eyes holding a shamed expression, and began to caress him.

“All right, Teena, all right. I’m not as good as you. Never was, never was. You’re more a man than I. . . .”

He pushed him away at length, and poured out half-a-tumbler. Then the tears broke again.

“O God! This damned hole . . . this blasted life. . . .”

The evening ended as the previous one had. Slowly the feeling of self-pity gave way to a rising surge of

## *Two and Two Make Five*

rage, and Mr. Chelson was soon shouting at the walls and defying heaven and hell. The movables in the room were, to their detriment, exercised once more; and the nimble Teena, as of old, provided the vocal target. Eventually, the candle was flung, and in the immediately ensuing darkness, Mr. Chelson subsided with incoherent oaths, and Teena made his escape.

As he headed towards the jungle, he felt that new twitching of disgust re-assail him; and he went slowly, pondering. Many thoughts swept through his mind; and linking them all together now was the fresh-forged chain of revolt. . . .

He slid deftly through the lush grasses, murmuring over and over:

"Jleem. Menarp sex fel's. . . . Jleem ba! . . . Brapbel! . . ." And the thin rattling of that new-forged chain sounded with delectable clangour in his mind from then on.

He swung up into a tree with a sigh of release, and passed on, leisurely, from tree to tree, till he was come to one that bore fruit, when he paused, and squatting with his back to the trunk, his legs clinging to a bough, he ate some mechanically, then considered his daring thoughts. They excited him. His eyes blinked rapidly; his hands wandered about, and he was unconscious that they were employed with nothing. . . .

The night began to fill with small sounds. The jungle quivered with the stealthy rousing life in it. The utter blackness under that unbroken roof of interwoven thick foliage was another firmament, starred with sudden, prowling eyes. A rustle, as undergrowth parted, brushing a passing, sinuous body . . . a little, started, rapidly-lost clatter of a pebble spurned by a trailing paw . . . a rending cry of prey swiftly pounced upon . . . all the terror and anguish of the jungle



## *The Chimpanzee*

smothered to half-sounds that scarcely rose above the multitudinous-leaved roof to trouble the vast outside air, and its remote sky pricked with remoter stars. . . .

Teena remained in his tree till the first weak dawn, when, leisurely still, he passed from tree to tree, and so to the jungle's edge: to the niggardly clearing that was Tobbe. . . .

Three days later, the last strands of patience holding him to Mr. Chelson, snapped. Fear and anger stirring in him, he danced from foot to foot, his arms waving, his mouth bared: showing his clenched teeth. He could only mumble and snarl. Presently, he became more coherent, but still in his own language. Finally, wrenching open the door, he shouted:

"I've stood you—long enough!" His arms rose and fell spasmodically with his emotion; his eyes glared, his mouth remaining savagely open—then he darted out: his ungainly form sinking on to all fours.

Mr. Chelson, taking rapid aim, threw a chair in the hope of effective results. It struck a neighbouring hut, bursting spectacularly in a shower of fragments, some fifty yards from the scrambling Teena. With a curse, Mr. Chelson abandoned the chimpanzee to unnameable retributions; and sought his whisky. . . .

Teena's return to the jungle, and to his old life, was easily accomplished. But his acceptance by his fellows was not so simple a matter. During the first couple of days, they held grimly aloof: pretending not to see him. Then, gradually, they took to watching him: noting his every movement: his goings and comings. Before the first week was over several of the most curious, and several of the kindest-natured, accosted him: the former with questions; the latter with information of recent events, and of discovered food in the neighbourhood. To all, he was courteous and

## *Two and Two Make Five*

friendly ; and eventually he found himself unconditionally accepted, and allowed a place in their councils. . . .

With what relief did he relinquish the hundred tiring, uncomfortable contortions and contrivings that humans use : the details and finicky, useless complications ! and reassume the old simplicities ! Day was become a vivid time of calm enjoyments ; and slowly, more and more distant the hideous ritual through which he had been forced by the urgent Mr. Chelson. The night was ever a delight : a coolness and a wideness, a constant feeling of the friendly touches of leaves and twigs, and the security of good, seizable boughs.

But, despite his appearance of having forgotten entirely his long period of alienation in Mr. Chelson's company—thought of that period was constantly with him. He gave himself much to escaping from others' company, and, squatting alone high in some dense-leaved tree, or under the drooping boughs of a bush, going over the many mental scars of Mr. Chelson's infliction.

This brooding continued for a month : Teena's dominant, and never-lessening, desire for revenge instructing it : analysing it, and seeking to draw some plan of accomplishment out of its maze. . . .

When, eventually, he did alight upon a plan : he was amazed at its utter simplicity ; its obvious inevitability. To reverse the old positions ; what more patent ? He, Teena, the master, and Mr. Chelson the servant ; the introduction to a new life : to new customs, a new language—Mr. Chelson should, with the aid of all possible endeavours, be turned into a near-as-maybe chimpanzee ! What a sweet, what a just, revenge ! . . .

Teena, reaching this wonderful conclusion, could not contain himself. He danced with wild abandon ; swung ecstatically along a lithe hanging bough, and swarmed fifty feet up a smooth trunk, chuckling with delight. . . .

## *The Chimpanzee*

But it was one thing to evolve a fine plan ; and quite another to enlist his fellows' sympathies, and help in carrying it out.

At first, the proposition was accorded unqualified disapproval. This was tempered, shortly afterward, by acknowledgment that, the whole matter properly considered, it was the only just revenge. Then, various objections were offered, and brilliantly disposed of by the eager Teena, who, finally, by a passionate recital of Mr. Chelson's violent assorted activities, when inspired either by temper or whisky, or by both—carried the excited and emotional company over to his side *en masse* ; then departed, hand over hand, through the trees, with their enthusiastic pledge of unlimited help, and loud approving shouts of "Latπ—enß ! Latπ—enß !" echoing in his ears. . . .

The descent upon Mr. Chelson was made late in the night. He was discovered, as Teena from old experience had expected, a-sprawl and unconscious in his cane-chair. Whisky had afforded him its unfailing oblivion ; and lapped in its all-enfolding softnesses he was a noisily breathing body without a soul.

It was an awkward business for the six chimpanzees : the dragging of Mr. Chelson clear of his hut, through and beyond the unconscious Tobbe, into the jungle : strenuous as well as awkward.

Teena directed the proceedings, and led the way. The many times that Mr. Chelson fouled of a root, or a bush, or the widespread, long-trailing net of a ground-creeper, were tedious and exasperating. But, lapped deep in, and overheaped with, those all-enfolding softnesses, Mr. Chelson was brought, still unconscious—but curiously patterned, as to his body, with abrasions, tears and cuts—to that part of the inner jungle where the rest of the company of chimpanzees awaited. . . .

## *Two and Two Make Five*

For some time Teena brooded: regarding his late master. Then, on a sudden thought, began to undress him, tearing away the stained and spotted cotton jacket, the buttonless shirt and wrinkled, shapeless trousers. Lastly, the once-white, but now yellow-brown, shoes.

Still unaware of his position, his meted treatment and his naïve state, Mr. Chelson continued his dalliance in depths of stupor. . . .

Slowly emerging at length—the darkness of the jungle long since broken to a green-and-mauve half-light—it was to discover himself the centre and cynosure of a close-gathered circle of motionless chimpanzees.

He stared at them a space: comprehension tardily stirring in his mind. He jerked with his limbs; his fingers plucked aimlessly at a long-fronded fern. . . . Then he discovered his nudity. His mind now in full possession of his plight, he struggled into a half-sitting posture; and his eyes darted beyond the rows of bodies, the blinking stares, estimating chances of escape, seeking means. . . . Suddenly his eyes abandoned their quick search: he had recognized Teena.

He breathed: "Teena!"

And all at once, he knew he could not escape: he was held.

"Teena!" he breathed again, swallowing noisily.

He was as good as dead, his brain insisted, as good as dead. He reconstructed events with intuitive leaps of thought; a swift rushing of dizziness rippled and rippled over him, and he closed his eyes. He began stammering. His hands trembled, and dropped the torn frondage. Then he fell silent.

And in the silence, still no animal stirred, or averted the fixed stare of his eyes.

Mr. Chelson could bear it no longer. He sprang up and confronted Teena:

## *The Chimpanzee*

"Well, what do you want with me?" he shouted hoarsely. "What do you want?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The education of Mr. Chelson, from then on, was an arduous and protracted affair. If, at first, he clung tenaciously and desperately to the alluring hope of escape and freedom: he gradually came to acknowledge that its allurements were empty and vain, and to dispense with its glittering sham. Day and night he was surrounded by a bodyguard which never for a moment relaxed its vigilance. . . .

It seemed, in those initial weeks, that Teena had dreamed an impossible dream: despite all efforts—meticulous instruction and guidance, careful precept and patient admonishment—Mr. Chelson shaped but poorly, and was nigh worthless human material in the important aspect of innate chimpanzee-stuff content. Many of the animals completely despaired of transforming him into anything approaching a chimpanzee; and sought Teena often, begging him to forgo his plan; but Teena was immovable in his determination, and refused. Much he drew apart and brooded; and watched Mr. Chelson ineptly struggle through the lengthy curriculum provided for him. . . .

But a wind may not blow from one direction for ever; and Mr. Chelson, obeying that law in the scope of which winds and men are equal, began to change, slowly and painfully, but to change, and acquire, at first, small proficiency, which, eventually, showed in his grasp a consummate mastery.

It no longer became necessary to keep him, a whole morning, practising progression from tree to tree, till he cried, worn and aching, for an interval of respite on the ground, which would be refused; and then,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

when, in one of the swings, he missed his clutch and fell headlong—to punish him by making him hang by his calves from a bough for the duration of Teena's pleasure, after which throbbing position, forcing him up the smooth trunk of a tree to its summit.

Mr. Chelson now did all of these things with comfort and without anxiety; and his brain had at length accepted the fact that the ground was no longer a necessity for him, but an occasional luxury.

His first great day of triumph was when he raced a score of chimpanzees through the trees to a distant glade of succulent roots; and, the glade being therefore his, by right of prior claim, he generously allowed the outpaced and disappointed ones share in the food. . . .

But the gushing rains on his naked body, the fierce sun, the piercing of thorns, and malicious prickings and rippings of boughs and bushes, had taken him some time to endure with equanimity. But his hair grew long, and matted over his neck; his beard, rejoicing in its licence, spread thick and prolific—and before long, only his eyes were visible: wide-opened and sharp-stared. Because of these eyes, and their unique quality of unblinkingness, he was called “Strong Eye”; no chimpanzee could out-stare him; each that attempted the feat was forced to void his glance, and to retire. . . .

Naturally hairy over the chest and belly, the legs, and arms: he was glad of this characteristic: it served him with appreciable protection—both as to covering, and as to colouring. His progress in chimpanzee-language was slow but steady; and he took pride in enlarging his vocabulary as the months passed. So far as the other inhabitants of the jungle were concerned, to most of them he constituted both a puzzle and a problem. His first weeks had provided him with feasts

## *The Chimpanzee*

of terror and helplessness ; but his bodyguard had invariably explained him, or protected him, satisfactorily. His hardily-acquired animal-craft soon became recognized, and thereafter, in moments of crisis, stood him in excellent stead. . . .

And so, "Strong Eye," one with a company of chimpanzees, ranging the jungle, was become an altogether different creature from Mr. Stanley Chelson, once of Tobbe. The most that could have been said of Mr. Chelson was that he had once been a man. The least that could be said of "Strong Eye" was that he was a chimpanzee. We have done with that shadow that once showed in Tobbe : it is dead. But "Strong Eye's" array of excellences may well detain us, and call forth our envious admiration. Chief of these excellences was his zest for life : with what energy and enthusiasm he spent his days and nights ! His affection for Teena, half-submerged, in the old Tobbe days, by a running tide of whisky and disappointment, became uppermost and splendidly apparent. Rancour subsided : Teena put out of his mind the old quarrels, the plans of revenge : he was content in his master work : the transformation of Mr. Chelson into "Strong Eye." And "Strong Eye" was happy : truly free of care and happy for the first time in his life, in the wild free days, the calm, scented, pleasurable nights that succeeded each other in the dim green, or the cool dusk, or the black mystery, of the wonderful jungle his house and his home. . . . Peace welled sweetly in his heart : the sacred drops ran in his veins. He knew Beauty : her cool calmness breathed constantly about him ; she stood before him, haunting and sanctifying all spaces and places wherein he moved. . . .

Though now quite accepted by the company of chimpanzees, some few individuals still retained prejudices

## *Two and Two Make Five*

against him ; and it seemed unlikely that anything could occur to cause them to remove them, and accept him completely. Several years passed in this fashion, when a catastrophe wrought a sudden decision, and banished the last remaining prejudices for ever.

Teena, one night, straying alone, was trampled by an elephant, and died.

The great grief of " Strong Eye " ensuing, compelled towards him a strong rush of sympathy, that turned with slow subtlety and gathering strength into love. . . .

For some time, " Strong Eye " moved about alone, and had nothing to do with councils or conversation ; mourning apart. Returning, at length, he found himself elected leader. The honour overwhelmed him, and touched him. And from then on, he worked, and thought, long in the interests of his company. By virtue of his humanity, added to his acquired chimpanzee-ship, he became supreme, and one of the lords of the jungle. . . .

And, in the rich soil of his mind, there began splendidly to show the blossom of a great idea. He thought often upon Tobbe : that untidy cluster of huts grouped in the clearing grudgingly yielded by the proud jungle. And he thought of the sixty or seventy Europeans—English, Germans, Portuguese and Dutch—that composed Tobbe. And the splendour of his idea glowed in his desire to bring them to a like felicity such as he enjoyed. He saw them prevailed upon to relinquish civilization, which he viewed as but a mountain of complications raised upon the plain of existence, and to enter the wide jungle and take up once more their relinquished ancient birthright of freedom and wildhood and happiness. And he saw the chafing majestic jungle, released, spread jubilantly over that clearing, and cover for ever the village that once was Tobbe.



## *The Chimpanzee*

That idea was powerful, and not to be withstood; that splendour not to be ignored. "Strong Eye," on hands and feet, entered the clearing in the late afternoon. As he approached Tobbe, he walked erect, and a fine, astonishing figure he appeared. He went straight to the central space fronting the store, and, as he went, ridding his mind of the jagged, sharp and low-guttural speech which now seemed natural to him, and patiently searching his memory for the old speech of the round smooth words running in delicate procession.

He clapped his hands, and called loudly; and the huts exuded curious and perplexed men, who lounged lazily near, and grouped about him. All Tobbe eventually stood there, and heard his amazing plea. Scarcely an interjection came at first; but on "Strong Eye's" revealing his old identity:

"Don't you remember Stanley Chelson? Stan. Chelson? That's me, then. O, I'm different now. . . ."

They shouted at him, refusing belief. But he took no notice, and went on: telling them of life in the jungle, urging them to accompany him back.

There was loud jeering laughter. Then, as he persisted and insisted, and none could refuse note of his sincerity, they cried that he was mad, and gestured at him to return to his jungle, and quickly, and leave them in peace. . . .

But nothing that they said roused his anger, nor dissipated his patience. In his mind, glowed the splendour. He waited for silence: then said finally:

"It's no good. You've got to come. I've arranged it. You'll have to give in. . . ."

They stared at each other.

"He's mad! He's mad!"

They stared, and began moving. Slowly their interest in the incident was evaporating. . . . Then suddenly

### *Two and Two Make Five*

they paused. "Strong Eye" had put his hands to his lips and shouted to the distance: "Jmeen-jit! Jmeen-jit!"

Instinctively, almost with one accord, the men glanced apprehensively behind.

Then a startled tremor took them. Emerging all round from the jungle, scores deep, appeared a ring of deliberately-advancing chimpanzees. Even while they stared, taken completely by surprise, it began with ominous sureness and swiftness to gather unbrokenly, and draw in. . . .

# *The Gong of Transportation*



## *The Gong of Transportation*

BEFORE the young king Merea had reigned a month, it was clear to his Councillors that the brawl and babble of government afforded him no delight at all. The fact was commented on among them; but they reminded each other that Merea was but a young man; and that the weight of a crown presses heavily upon unaccustomed brows. . . .

The passage of four years, however, showing Merea's attitude unchanged, found them, accordingly, reconciled to their destiny: the wand of supreme office was indeed in the hand of Merea, but it waved—or this way, or that—in obedience to their will. . . .

It was bandied about his land that Merea was a dreamer. Such was, in fact, the truth. His waking hours were divided among three activities: reading, dreaming and government.

He read—violently, anxiously, hurriedly—as a starving man eats. The urgency to read would fall on him suddenly, like a fever-fit; and like a fever-fit would rack him with torment, and allow him no peace, for days at a time. Invariably, a long period of languid inaction would ensue: his mind would be engaged with the enchanting nebulae of dreams. . . .

At such times as affairs of State demanded his presence in the Council Chamber, he had long ago found it exceedingly difficult to follow, link by link, the slow, deliberate unwinding of the chains of diplomatic talk; and the process void of all interest to him when he did

## *Two and Two Make Five*

so. Accordingly, he had gradually given over any pretence to meticulous attention; and would sit, at the head of the long, document-scattered table, as impervious to the rise and fall of disputation about him as a cliff of granite to the dash of blown spray. His curious grey eyes would be of a sudden veiled over with thin, but impenetrable, grey veils; and behind these his spirit would have escaped and joined in a faring of dreams. . . .

On one subject he was wont to talk wistfully and at length. It was the dreamer's inevitable subject: Perfection.

"I have seen," he would say, "poverty, suffering and sorrow. I have seen ugliness. Let us, my lords, at once make laws, so to eradicate these evils! Our country is a fair country. In the midst of fairness, how can we allow other than fairness? My lords, I pray you! . . . As for me, I am filled with disgust for myself! I read many books, and use long hours extravagantly spending my thoughts on impossible imaginings—and thus I go treading ever, selfishly, the treadmill of myself. I would abandon my ways forthwith! Are not my hands as other men's? And my mind? I would have my hands and mind yoked to the service of Perfection! I would engage against all these cruel evils that beset our land. . . . O my dear lords, it is my heart's desire that our land be made perfect. . . ."

And the old men who were the Councillors would answer gravely; nodding, and fingering their beards; making involved reference to the inscrutability of the ways of the gods with men; drawing attention to the illustrative phenomenon of the fly in amber; and assuring their Master of their implicit devotion to his commands, their profound admiration for his disinterested and lofty concern.

They would leave him: their gait slow and shuffling;

## *The Gong of Transportation*

their white heads sunken on their breasts ; murmuring, each to each. And Merea, shortly, would open a book ; or else be drawn away by a gentle dream to spaces beyond the world. . . .

The day was bound to come when he would look about him for a new book to read—and would look in vain. That unwelcome day eventually arriving, he sent for his Lord Librarian, and said to him :

“ Can it be that I have read all the books in your care ? ”

The Librarian waved a hand explanatorily.

“ Your majesty has read with such diligence——”

Then he bethought himself. “ There is the Blue Room. . . . ”

Merea sighed.

“ And, of course, the Green Room. . . . ”

“ Many of the books in the Green Room I have re-read five times, or, it may be, six.”

“ It is true,” declared the Librarian. “ And how useless that I mention the Long Gallery——”

“ How useless,” echoed Merea, toying with a tuft of ermine on his sleeve.

“ Or the Domed Room.” . . .

“ Alas,” exclaimed Merea. “ So, there is no book left in the Palace that would be new to me.” His eyes glanced through the window : seeking the near-by three tinkling jets thrown high by the little jade fountain half-hidden in its quiet grove of persimmons.

“ And I doubt,” murmured the Librarian, “ whether there exists a book in the Kingdom that your majesty has not already read.”

This, of course, was flattery ; or, if you will, such meaningless politeness as was merely fitting to the occasion. But, being a King, the music of flattery had long since become but a dull noise in the ear of Merea ;

## *Two and Two Make Five*

and, as for politeness, it was wont to pass him unnoticed as if unuttered.

The Librarian was dismissed ; and Merea opened the gate of his mind, that a dream might perchance drift in. But it seemed there were no dreams abroad that hour ; and, restless, Merea fell to considering what he should do. In his extremity of dissatisfaction, he was even considering the novel idea of calling a Council, when he was saved from taking such an unprecedented step by the return of the Librarian, who had bethought himself again.

"May I suggest to your majesty," said he, "a careful searching of the Treasury? It is conceivable that, among the gifts made, from time to time, by the princes of other lands—rare books, unique manuscripts, may have been included ; indeed, it has occurred to me even——"

"An excellent suggestion !" cried Merea : and sent messengers to command the immediate presence of the Lord of the Treasury, the Warden of the State Treasures, and the Warden of the Private Treasures.

When these dignitaries presented themselves, Merea decided to accompany them.

It was his first visit to the thirty great vaults of his Treasury, and he walked slowly, pausing often to examine an object, and to question his Wardens concerning it.

The first vault was filled with the pelts of animals and the plumage of birds. The second with precious ointments, unguents, spices and perfumes. Despite the vessels being either of alabaster or of gold, the sweetness of the air was such that one passed through it indescribably exhilarated and enraptured, and near to swooning. The third vault contained precious metals and gems. A long chest was opened here, and the light directed on its contents. Such a swift flash and glitter leapt out, that Merea raised his hands to shield his eyes involuntarily.



## *The Gong of Transportation*

"What is it?" he cried. "Cut diamonds and rubies? No; rather the west sky at sunset held prisoner," he declared, and passed on.

The next vault held carpets and tapestries, and woven stuffs of all kinds. Then came a collection of statuary; and after that, on shelves that reached to the high ceiling, a multitude of small objects of divers kinds and uses.

"It is likely that in the Fourteenth Vault we shall end our quest," said the Warden of the State Treasures, looking up from the papers of his Records. "For I see that against that vault is written the names of Yoba, Dia and Matchea."

"But," said Merea, "I have read the works of Yoba, Dia and Matchea already."

"Of course," the Warden of the State Treasures bowed. "Yet, my liege, it has often been said that Yoba, Dia and Matchea each wrote much, but gave little to the world. It may be that works of theirs, of which the world knows nothing, repose yonder in the Fourteenth Vault."

"Quite," nodded the Warden of the Private Treasures.

"True," agreed the Lord of the Treasury.

"Ah," said Merea, pondering; then reached out a hand. "Tell me, of what peculiar value is this gong, that it is here among my treasures?"

And he held up a small bronze gong.

The Warden of the State Treasures fluttered the leaves of his Records for some moments abortively, then remarked:

"It is a Private Treasure."

Whereupon the Warden of the Private Treasures busied himself with the matter, and presently announced:

"It is called the Gong of Transportation; and was a tribute of loyalty from the magician Ababa, on the occasion of your accession to the throne. It is endued

## *Two and Two Make Five*

with the property of transporting objects at will. On the instruction being uttered aloud, and a single note struck from the gong, instant transportation of the object named is effected."

"As a piece of workmanship," reflected Merea, turning the gong all ways, "it gives a minimum of pleasure to the eye. . . . And, by the way, when one comes to consider the great Art of Magic, one at once notices it seems to be a convention among magicians that, the more strange, the more wonderful, the result they procure, always the more insignificant, the more commonplace is the vehicle they employ."

He continued to turn the gong this way and that in his hands, and to gaze at it closely—though quickly the keen light of criticism faded in his eyes; and, had the Lord of the Treasury, and the Wardens of the State, and of the Private Treasures, been watching his eyes, they would have observed a sudden veiling of them with what appeared to be thin, but impenetrable, grey veils, and perhaps have conjectured—aright—that the delicate spirit of Merea was adventuring away caught in a press of dreams. . . .

The Lord of the Treasury proceeded a tentative step or two onward, then paused; Merea had not moved.

The Warden of the Private Treasures looked at his Master enquiringly, and drew his rustling robe closer about him, for he was an old man, and the sharp air of the stone-paved vaults pierced with ease the velvet and silk he wore.

Then the Warden of the State Treasures, scanning closely his Records—eyes following his seeking finger—murmured: "Of a truth, in the Fourteenth Vault . . ." whereat Merea roused, and exclaimed: "Ah! I have been thinking. . . ." The Warden of the Private Treasures made to relieve him of the burden of the gong.

## *The Gong of Transportation*

"No," said Merea, declining; "I require it, and shall bear it hence. . . . A most wonderful thought has come to me. . . ." He seemed to have forgotten the reason of his presence in the Treasury; and, on being reminded of it, permitted the Fourteenth Vault to be reached, and a search for manuscripts and books to be instituted—though it was quite plain to his lords that his interest in the matter had entirely disappeared, and was, instead, directed intensely toward the Gong of Transportation. . . .

The following day, the result of this preoccupation became known to the whole of the kingdom. Merea had addressed his Council.

"My lords: you have heard me, often enough, in years gone by, inveigh against Imperfection. I have been, by turns, grieved, angry and despairing. Finally, as a measure of self-protection, I have adopted an attitude of philosophic acceptance. Yet my heart has been exceedingly sorrowful the while; and I have always longed for some place wherein I might live, aware that that place was perfect. A vain desire, you think! and so thought I, until, yesterday, I came upon this magic Gong. Now, it seems, at last I am able to set about preparing that Perfect Land—a small corner of this our kingdom altered and made wonderful—therein to sojourn; and rule as heretofore—excluding the rest of the world so involved with poverty, suffering, sorrow and ugliness. . . . There, in the midst of perfection, what happiness shall I not know! What content!" . . .

He broke off, musing. Presently he said:

"I shall begin immediately. And I have thought: I shall journey about the world, and whatsoever I see that is perfect, and that I love, that shall I transport to the chosen small corner of my kingdom. And it may be that I shall be journeying long years—for who can

## *Two and Two Make Five*

believe that the search for perfection is brief?" A wistful look suddenly showed in his eyes. "And the years go by on fierce feet when one is no longer in Youth." . . .

That same month, with a small retinue, he set out. . . .

Now, in the province of Bata-ba-rena there had been built, in the glorious days of the great prophet Krel, a mighty wall: one hundred feet in height, circular in shape, and enclosing a space—so it was computed—of some eighty square miles. It had been the will of Krel that the wall be broken by only a single gate. The key to this gate was so massive that it required two men to lift it: yet, once placed in the lock, a boy could operate it with a single hand,—so cunningly was the mechanism contrived.

Of this wonderful wall, Merea had often heard; and he determined that it should be his first acquisition—the boundary of his Perfect Territory.

After three months of travelling, he approached it, and at once commanded that it remove to the ordained small corner of his kingdom. Raising the Gong aloft, he struck from it a single note, whereupon it was instantly as though there had never been a mighty wall in the province of Bata-ba-rena.

With considerable satisfaction at the successful beginning of the consummation of his heart's desire, Merea journeyed on, traversing the weary plains of Bro, and entering at length the mountainous region of Gra-Cell. In that region was the famous Lake of Tedènera, so deeply sunk between its four guardian peaks that no wind ever disturbed its fair surface: not like to smooth silver, nor pale platinum; nor to a silent gathering of moonlight; but like the æther itself: clear and unmoving; holding ever, inverted, its four guardian peaks

## *The Gong of Transportation*

ermined with snow and rock. And Merea ascended, and gazed on it a long space. Then he retired a distance, and commanded, and wakened the small note of the Gong,—and the lovely lake of Tedènera vanished. . . .

For seven years Merea wandered, this way and that, about the world ; and he saw much beauty ; and the thin voice of the Gong spoke often. At the end of seven years, Merea returned home, that he might arrange his acquisitions as he would have them.

His people welcomed him with great joy ; and, because of their welcome, for some days he was so glad, that he forgot the reason of his return ; then, recalling it, busied himself straightway with the disposal of the imported features of his Perfect Territory. . . .

In the midst of this most exacting work, the Councillors approached him, and, on the plea of pressing business, arranged for his presence at an immediate Council.

With reluctance, and ill-disguised impatience, Merea suspended his delectable activities within the Wall of Krel for a day, and, duly attending at the Council Chamber, was surprised to learn that his subjects petitioned his marriage.

He exclaimed at the idea ; but was really indifferent. His only desire was to continue with his travels, for the creation of the Perfect Territory.

With this desire, his Councillors stated that they were well-enough acquainted ; they begged him, however, before he set forth again, to marry one of the eligible five princesses, with whom it was politic he should : for reasons of state.

“ Well, if the matter can be disposed of at once——” conceded Merea, at length.

And, accordingly, he married, and delayed further construction of the Perfect Territory for a year.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

At the end of that time, his wife bore him a son.

"It is fitting," he reflected: "fitting that I married, and have now an heir. For him, too, am I preparing this Perfect Territory. And, truly, I must set about it at once, for I am young no longer, alas!" Before he departed, he saw to it that the single gate in the Wall of Krel was locked, and the great Key put in safe keeping; and he issued a command that no person enter the Territory henceforth. . . .

For twelve years Merea wandered, this way and that, about the world—viewing valleys and gorges; streams and cataracts; forests, rivers and rich plains. This way and that; considering palaces and gardens, parks, and woods where dwelt strange or familiar animals and birds. And whatsoever he thought most beautiful and most perfect, that he transported to the ordained small corner of his kingdom, by virtue of his command and the small note of the Gong. . . .

Then it was time to return home, and engage in the long labour of disposition. . . .

For five years Merea laboured thus; yet it was clear to him that much else remained to be sought, and added to the Territory, before it attained Perfection.

And presently, he was abroad once more, ranging the wide countries of the world.

It chanced that, when he was come into the remote land of the Bereldeans, and was appraising the wonderful flowered Hill of Caves which is the chief ornament of that land, the King of the Bereldeans approached, and was witness of the sudden disappearance of the Hill. With a cry of rage he accosted Merea, thinking him a magician, demanding the instant return of the Hill.

"I shall not return it," declared Merea calmly.

The King trembled with rage.

## *The Gong of Transportation*

"Because," continued Merea, "I have taken it to adorn a Territory I am making: a Territory of Perfection—and surely Perfection is its own justification?"

But the King would not have it so, and drew his sword, and advanced on Merea.

Now the King was young and lusty, and Merea was grown old, and he was weary with much travelling. And he commanded suddenly, and struck a thin note from the Gong: transporting the King to the far mountains of the Moon; whereafter he continued on his way without further concern. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Shortly after this, Merea returned to his own land, and was busy for the space of three years in his Territory; and often in those three years did his son, the young Alèa, beg to be allowed to pass with him through the gate, and walk in the Territory. But—"No," refused Merea. "Not yet" . . . and each time he entered alone.

It seemed to him now—incredible fact! how his heart leapt!—that the addition of but a single copse would complete the Territory—ending his life's work. . . . Ah! he paused. His life's work. His years were many. Truly his search for Perfection had been a long search; and it was not yet over. If, quite soon, he did not discover that single copse—of just such a size, and of certain precise qualities—his work, so far as he was concerned, would have gone for nothing; he would have lived in vain; never enjoyed residence in the midst of his making. . . .

<sup>1</sup> Some years later, Merea, recalling the incident of the King of the Bereldeans, felt a sudden welling of compassion, and commanded, and struck the Gong, and brought him back to the world; and he had many strange tales to tell of the far mountains of the Moon, and of the wraith-like Moon-people; but they must be recounted elsewhere.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

The thought urged him anew to effort, and he took boat for distant Ild ; and in Ild, though his desire was indeed sharp and swift, his progress was slow ; for he was become enfeebled and weak ; and he cried out bitterly against the limitations of his body. . . .

Yet within the year, he came upon a copse : and it was just the size, and possessed the precise requisite qualities ; and he laughed, then sighed, and commanded in a voice fallen to a curious whisper ; and struck a thin note from the Gong. . . .

\*            \*            \*            \*            \*

The two men lifted the great key and placed it in the lock and turned it, and threw wide the single gate of the mighty Wall of Krel. And Mereca, with faltering steps, his hands agitatedly clasping the wide fall of his beard, entered his Perfect Territory. After a few paces, he stopped ; and his Councillors, clustered at the Gate, observed him swaying gently. . . .

They were just in time to catch him in their arms, as he fell : murmuring softly to himself, his eyes fixed on the fair four peaks that rose holding high the Lake of Tedènera. . . . Presently, he ceased to murmur, then his eyes closed ; and he left life in the very moment of his triumph. . . .

It was later that his son, the young Alèa, passed through the gate for the first time, and gazed on all the array of splendour and beauty. And as he went here, and there, a faint flashing, first of bewilderment, then of enquiry, gathered in his eyes, and he asked suddenly : "Is it true that my father considered his task finished : this Territory perfect ?"

And they answered that his father had indeed considered his task finished, and the Territory Perfect. . . .

Then as Alèa frowned and pursed his lips, the



### *The Gong of Transportation*

expression of inquiry fled from his eyes, and was succeeded by a gleam of determination.

"But I," he said. "I——"

Then he waved a hand.

"Bring me the Gong," he commanded.



*The Painter of Trees*



## *The Painter of Trees*

IN his lonely hut among the mountains, the great Painter of Trees lay very still, and knew that he was dying.

"No pain, Allen—none at all," he told the anxious old servant. "Don't worry. I'm not young any longer, and must go some time. . . ."

Allen stood helplessly.

"What can I do, sir? What can I do?"

He was too old to meet an emergency with prompt action. He bent over the Painter with nervously moving hands.

"There's nothing to do. . . . I'm just falling down and away. It's a curious feeling. Not unpleasant. Like a tide, you know: ebbing, ebbing. Ever so slowly. . . ."

Allen roused himself.

"The doctor: down in the village. The doctor. I'll go at once. But, can I leave you? Is there anything first, before I go?"

Presently, he went. The village was three miles away. . . .

The day, with a last desperate effort, had unfurled its defiant standard in the face of besieging night, and the brave glory flew wide. The old Painter, from his high window, watched the ruthless night trample it down, as the quick hordes of the stars spread triumphantly over the field where it had waved.

How many times had he seen that occur! And

## *Two and Two Make Five*

now, this was the last time. Never again for his eyes to see. . . .

And the mountains. He was leaving them, too. The great, quiet, serene mountains : earth holding up her ecstatic hands to the beauty of the sky. . . .

Then the trees. The things he had loved during his life above all others. The things he had always joyously lived with, and devotedly lived for. . . .

He closed his eyes ; feeling a sudden welling of grief at the realization that from them, too, he was going. . . .

Often he had said that there came times when he felt completely at one with the trees : all their long, close preparation in Winter ; their swift, leaping, pulsing joy in Spring ; their full triumph in Summer ; and slow, quiet sorrow in Autumn. . . .

He lay very still.

And yet, perhaps, after all, after all. . . . He was old now ; he had lived his life ; done his work. Lately, these last few years, he had begun to feel rather tired. The old vigour had been passing, and a slowness creeping in. . . .

Of course, he had never really achieved. O, didn't he know it ! In his interpretation of trees, despite all his love and effort—always something vital, the essential, core-like Something, had eluded him. Grope for it as he might, down what long days and nights—now with pigment, now with thought—never had he been able to grasp it.

He had failed, then. But constant failure had kept him constantly striving, the urgent spirit of him unadmitting of defeat.

But to the world he had seemed a bright figure that had risen and gone unerringly on from success to success.

How easy to satisfy the standard of the world ; how difficult to achieve the commendation of one's soul ! . . .

## *The Painter of Trees*

That topmost peak : always out of sight : veiled in an impenetrable mist. Was the mist mortality ? . . .

Soon, he would know, perhaps ; and would leave great beauty to enter, amazed, on greater. . . .

There came a rustling in the night, and filled the little hut : a gentle rustling. . . .

"Master !" said a thin voice, scarcely above a whisper.

The old Painter opened his eyes, but could see nothing. The wick of the lamp that Allen had lighted, before he left, against the coming darkness, was turned low ; and gave barely enough flame to distinguish objects from shadows.

"Go on," urged another voice ; and others took up the words : "Yes, go on." "Call him again." "Perhaps he's asleep."

The rustling began again, then gradually subsided.

The voices trailed away ; and the first voice spoke again : "Master."

"Yes ?" The Painter looked with wonder in the direction of the speakers. "Who is it ? Who are you ?"

"Ah !" said the voices. "He's not asleep. Not asleep. . . ."

The rustling rose and fell, and the first voice spoke again :

"Master : we're the spirits of the trees you have painted during your life. . . . You know we have souls, don't you ?"

"I've always known that !" He stared vainly, this way and that, among the shadows.

"We've come to thank you," said the thin voice, "for giving us immortality in the world of men."

And all the other voices joined in ; "Yes ; to thank you." "We're grateful." "So we've come. We had

## *Two and Two Make Five*

to come. Just at this time ; when you are leaving the world. . . .”

The old Painter felt a warm rush of joy at his heart.

“O, but how good,” he cried. Then he fell sad.

“But I’ve failed,” he said slowly. “I’ve always failed. . . .”

The rustling sounded a moment, then ceased.

“You must know I’ve failed,” he repeated. “How I’ve always missed painting you as you really are. How, try as I would, I’ve always been powerless. . . .”

“That’s the other thing we’ve come to you about,” said the voice.

“Yes,” chimed in all the other voices. “The other thing.” “We came for two things.”

The first voice spoke again.

“Master, have you pencil and paper by you ?”

“Yes, under these. . . . Somewhere. . . .”

He reached his hand to the little table at the bedside, and took up his sketching-book and pencil.

“But why ?”

“We want you to draw one of us—one of us as we really are,” said the voice. “That’s our second reason.”

“Yes,” came the voices. “That’s our second reason.” “We’re grateful : and want to show that we are. . . .”

The Old Painter could not answer for a moment because of the wild excitement that gripped him. Then he said, with an effort, “But I can’t see you.”

“I’m a Magnolia,” said the voice.

There was a pause, and then : “Can you see me now ?”

The old Painter’s eyes opened widely, and he drew a deep breath.

“Yes—now,” he said quickly.

He turned the lamp-wick higher, and started drawing on the instant.



## *The Painter of Trees*

Twice he had to stay his pencil, and rest. But at length the work was done.

He fell back weakly then; his eyes closed; the pencil slipped from his fingers. . . .

"Good-bye," said the Magnolia, softly.

"Good-bye, Master," called the other voices. "Good-bye, dear Master." "Master." "Good-bye. . . ."

Again the hut was filled with gentle rustling, that passed away in a moment.

For some time there was silence.

The worn moon appeared at last from behind the loftiest hill; glanced palely for a moment below, then crept wearily into a cloud, as into a refuge from wandering. . . .

Then the gentle rustling suddenly filled the hut again.

"Ah! Have you come back?" asked the Painter, opening his eyes. . . .

But it was only a wind. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

"Quick," said Allen, full of fear.

Not too late?

The doctor started forward.

But the old Painter's eyes opened flickeringly.

"No, no," he said faintly. "Doctor, I'm afraid you can't do anything. . . . But—I've kept myself alive until you came. I had to see you. . . . Allen, Doctor. Come closer. I can't speak much. . . ." He tried to raise himself on an elbow, but failed. "Here's my greatest work. Yes, greatest! A tree—a Magnolia, Remember now. . . . Take it. . . . Be careful. . . ."

He pushed over the sketching-book. . . .

"I'm going . . . like a tide, like a tide. Ebbing—to the last ripple. . . ."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Two and Two Make Five*

“Here,—I say!” said the doctor. “He said a tree?”

Allen nodded without looking up; nervously twisting his fingers and locking them together.

The doctor came over to his side with the drawing.

“But this is the face of a—a god!” he stammered.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

### I

"WELL, what is it?" I called resignedly.

My landlady, her third delicate tap noticed, opened the door and thrust her cheerful face through the aperture and looked at me with a blending of relief and apology.

"This time, sir——"

"Mrs. Berry, Mrs. Berry!" I shook my head reproachfully, dropping my pen and leaning back in the chair. "The world doesn't know what a martyr I am to interruption. Haven't I asked—even begged, implored—you not to disturb me in the mornings until lunch-time? And it's barely eleven now. . . . O dear! You're incorrigible."

"But this time, sir!" A flicker of triumph proudly joined the blending of relief and apology. "It's Dr. Seagrave, and he said it was most partic'lar. . . . He said: 'Tell——'"

"All right, Mrs. Berry. That alters the case then, of course. A handsome apology to you. Show the Doctor up."

"Thank you, sir." And Triumph and Cheerfulness, with a slight gait of dignity, betook themselves away.

"My dear Mark, forgive my interrupting you like this——"

"Quite all right, old fellow. Cigarette?"

"I'm very worried."

He subsided into a chair, and, refusing the cigarettes, drew out his pipe and pouch.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Oliver Waymouth," he said.

"He's not worse?" I asked sharply; my conscience accusing me of neglect. I hadn't called for five days. "Not worse?"

"He's not worse, really," said Seagrave; "but he's not better. And he *should* be getting better. It worries me. There he is: wanting to die: without any interest in living. And he *will* die." . . .

"He mustn't," I said.

"Who's going to save him?" asked Seagrave.

"Good heavens, Walter, is it like that?"

"I'm afraid so. Really, I've done all I can," gravely. "A doctor's not a magician. Oliver doesn't want to go on living. Very well, then: he won't go on living. He lacks the desire, the will to do so. . . . And I've seen people before, like that: and they've gone: wilted like flowers, you know." . . .

Oliver Waymouth, Walter Seagrave and I had been at Winchester together; we had gone up to Oxford together; and had kept together ever since.

"You're the last hope, Mark," said Seagrave at length, breaking the silence.

I looked up in surprise.

"I?"

Seagrave nodded.

"I've thought. You're a writer. You've ideas. Can't you think out something—some plan? Because, it's come to that. Where medicine can't go, imagination can. . . . See? And you know me: what a material-minded, concrete sort of creature I am. I'm of no use now. It's your turn. Up to you."

"Tell me exactly, Walter, how. . . . I mean, about Oliver?" . . .

"Well, what's got to be done is to rouse him up to

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

an interest in life again. Get him to think that, after all, it's worth while."

"And then?"

"Nothing more. He'll do the rest himself. Strength will return. Careful feeding and a change of environment, and he'll be as fit as ever again."

I was silent.

Seagrave rose, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"It's a tall order, old man," he said. "I know."

He went over to the window.

"This young idiot of an Oliver!" he said gruffly.

Oliver was the youngest of the three of us; and he had always been impracticable and helpless in the most charming way; and Seagrave and I, between us, had always played the parts of guide and guardian. . . .

"I don't know," I said. "I'm as helpless as you." . . .

"No, no!" cried Seagrave. "Think, man! You've ideas. . . ."

"I feel so helpless," I confessed. "What can I do? Some plan. To think of some plan. . . ."

Poor old Oliver!

"I'll do all I can, Walter. . . . I'll get down to it."

Seagrave collected his hat and bag.

"You'll let me know, then? . . . I must hurry! I've an operation at twelve."

He was gone.

I tidied my writing-table slowly.

The best thing to do would be to take a walk, and think out a scheme. Yes, a walk.

I pressed the bell.

"I won't be in to lunch, Mrs. Berry. I'm going to walk round and round Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens."

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"But don't forget your lunch, sir, all the same," said the dear body.

"I won't forget," I promised tolerantly.

### II

There was a twitter from birds on the lawn: the gaiety and inconsequence of the sound deepening the sense of quiet and solemnity within the large sparsely-furnished room. Close to the window grew a chestnut-tree, and the sunshine, piercing beams through it, made the leaves seem a happy patchwork affair of light and shade. The blossoms looked like miniature ivory pagodas.

Always on entering the room, I was aware of the window, and its picture, first. It seemed to demand, as a right, the first glance. The room's occupant, it insisted, came second. . . .

I closed the door gently, and went over to the bed.

"Oliver," I said.

The head, propped on the mass of cushions, moved, and the lids lifted slowly.

"Mark."

I thought again: his face almost merges, with its pallor, into the pillows. Only the yellow of his hair and blue of his eyes show, really. Even his lips have no colour. . . . And I thought: he will slip away. . . . A lump rose in my throat. For a few seconds I struggled; then mastered it.

"Oliver, old boy, you must get better."

The lids drooped, from utter weariness it seemed. I wanted so much to impart to him some of my own vitality and eagerness. If only there existed a way of doing it!

"Don't you know?" I said. "It's Spring outside.



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

. . . The sun's back ; and the flowers are thickening everywhere. . . . You must get well again."

"Why? What's the use?"

"Because Life's fine. Living's such a joy. There's——"

I stopped ; feeling the grim strength of his weakness and apathy.

"Don't, Mark," he said. "It's all wrong. Life's not fine. Living's not a joy. The effort of it, the wounding. . . ."

"You're exaggerating, Oliver," I said gently. "Have you tasted all the dishes Life can set before you? Have you been everywhere, heard everything, seen everything? . . . Please!"

I took his hand.

"Think of some of the times we've had together : you, Walter and I. Have you forgotten? Why, there was that Spring when we went tramping through the Cotswolds——"

I smiled involuntarily at the recollection.

And Oliver, to my delight, smiled wanly too. For he remembered that Spring, and that tramp. . . .

"Look here, old fellow," I said firmly. "If you think you've made up your mind to lie here and fade out of the scene gradually—like the Cheshire Cat" (his smile flickered feebly again) "then you're mistaken. You've always had to reckon with Seagrave and me in your past life ; well, we're still to be reckoned with. We're putting our joint foot down."

"But I've not made up my mind to fade away," he protested.

"Well, you're not making any effort to get better," I said. "It's the same thing. . . ."

His eyes closed.

"No, but seriously, Oliver," I said, thinking the time

## *Two and Two Make Five*

come to unfold my plan ; “ I’ve thought of something that might amuse you. That’s what I’ve come about especially. You know, as I’m a writer, I’m always running up against queer and odd kinds of people. I meet them in a variety of different ways ; and they’re awfully interesting, most of them ! There are several I’ve in mind at the moment, who’ve had strange happenings in their lives, strange experiences. . . . Now, I want to trot them along to you, one at a time ; and they’ll tell you their histories, or episodes from them. . . . ”

Oliver made a movement with his hand ; but I hurried on.

“ It’s so true about one half of the world not knowing how the other half lives. Forgive the platitude. . . . ”

“ But, my dear Mark. . . . ”

“ It’s just to amuse you,” I continued. “ Time must drag—surely ? The days and the nights ? . . . Do let me bring them along, there’s a good fellow ! ”

I waited anxiously. For this was the scheme I had carefully thought out, whereby Oliver’s relaxing grip on life might be tightened. . . . Of course, the scheme might prove entirely useless ; but it was the only one of which I could think, and it seemed to have real possibilities. Seagrave had agreed to it at once. He had even roused some enthusiasm ; his medical caution despite. . . .

I gazed through the window. The birds : still scrambling in a noisy brown heap on the smooth emerald of the lawn. The happy patchwork affair of the chestnut’s leaves. The blossoms looking like——

“ All right ; have your way. . . . ” The wan flicker of the smile. “ Always lecturing, bullying me. . . . ”

I could have hurrah’d with delight.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"To-morrow, then, Oliver ; the first one. At about this time. . . ."

He nodded. His lids wearily buried the blueness of his eyes. . . .

I came away.

### III

"Oliver," I introduced, "this is Mr. Esdale. Esdale : Mr. Oliver Waymouth."

Esdale was large and impressive-looking. His face was florid, and his manner could only be described as being florid, too. He made frequent gestures with his hands ; interesting, explanatory gestures they were ; and the two diamond-rings on his little fingers flashed gaily as though they enjoyed the aerial sweeps and figures. His voice was rich and resonant ; and he knew how to control it : now speaking slowly and deliberately ; now quickly, yet always with careful regard for the full value of his words. In his discourse, he rang all the subtle changes that lie between the boom and the whisper. It was at once a pleasure and an instruction simply to listen to him, apart from the content of his speaking. . . .

After we had chatted for a while, I begged him tell Oliver the tale of that curious meeting he had had in Paris ; the history of that fellow,—what was his name, again ?

"Charlton."

O, yes, Charlton. . . .

Oliver settled himself more comfortably ; and I was gratified to see he looked at Esdale with a slight rousing of interest. Of course, I knew the tale already.

"Well." Esdale crossed one leg over the other, and, without more ado, began.

### *Mr. Esdale's Tale of The Detachable Soul*

One delightful May evening I was seated, with my old friend Henry West, at the Taverne du Panthéon, in the Boul' Mich'. West was talking with a great deal of animation: more than usual—the reason for which I duly ascribed to the rather lengthy procession of cognacs he had accommodated. I was scarcely listening to him. The sky had run the whole gamut of its blues, and was miraculously embarking on violet. From thence, I knew, it would continue to purple. I was watching, with that complete sensuous abandonment that one can only know on such an evening, and in Paris the Unique—after a wonder of a dinner, which, so to speak, has been sealed by perfect coffee and perfect cognac.

When West paused for a moment—to give a fresh order—I said: “The green of those trees against the sky!” nodding toward the Luxembourg Gardens, over the way.

I felt like that. All men were my brothers; the earth was a paradise; life was—Thought failed me.

West grinned. “I see you're impossible.” He despatched the contents of his glass, and rose.

“This æsthetic appreciation of Nature is all very well, so far as it goes,” he said. “But I must admit it doesn't completely satisfy *me*. This city, they tell me, holds other joys—and I think you can trust me to find some of 'em.”

Which was, well, slightly vulgar,—but was West.

“Oh, I can trust you, right enough!” I laughed.

With another grin, he went; and I returned lazily

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

to a contemplation of the Gardens and the skyline. . . .

"Pardon me, sir," said a voice suddenly at my side, in English; and I turned about to face one of the strangest-looking men I have ever seen. He had a long, thin face of a ghastly pallor; the lips were bloodless and drawn taut in a straight line; the eyes, under thick knotted brows, were black and unshining as cinders. It was a face that, on the instant, disturbed completely my careless sense of well-being. I think I shivered; for there was a definite suggestion from his fixed, tense regard, of things inhuman, otherworldly, unnameable. I thought of the Florentines' awed whisper behind the passing Dante: "There goes a man who has been in hell." . . .

"Pardon me," he repeated: "I couldn't help overhearing your last remark to your friend: that you could trust him; and I want to warn you——"

I continued to stare into the black, unshining eyes.

"Warn me?" I echoed mechanically, as he paused.

"Never trust anyone!" his voice fell to a fierce whisper. "Never. Anyone."

I realized then that I was behaving after the nerveless fashion of a bird hypnotized by a swaying and nearing serpent; and I took a grip on myself, looked away, reached for my glass and swallowed its contents.

Then I faced him again.

"Oh?" I remarked, trying to enter a commonplace note into the extraordinary conversation, and to ignore the dramatic fierceness of his whisper. Then I summoned a laugh; quite a creditable one, too, I think, under the circumstances.

"What would you?" I asked, as though amused. "Run the world without any trust at all?"

"Yes," he said. "I once trusted a man. . . ."

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Suddenly his fingers clenched together ; and his thick, knotted brows gathered so beetlingly they half-hid his eyes.

“And now,” he said ; “and now. . . .”

His hands fell on his knees ; his brows lifted, and his head drooped a little wearily.

“Listen,” he said ; “I must tell you. . . . To tell someone every now and then—to speak, to explain—gives me relief for a time.” . . .

“Sit here,” I said ; and he came to my table and began at once.

“It doesn’t matter who I am : I forgot about all that long ago. I go by the name of Charlton. My family thinks me dead ; and I’m sure the knowledge is a great comfort to them. I had the usual schooling, and went on to Cambridge. There I did the usual foolish things—and a few more beside ; left without a degree, and settled in London. Exactly what happened in the next six years is beside the point ; but I had created a scandal ; dragged the family’s name through the mire ; been disinherited ; and partaken of a period of prison—all by the end of the sixth year. After that—well, I suppose I sank to fairly low levels. Everything else was closed to me. The taint of prison clings, you know. I didn’t mind. I became a thief. I had come to know three other men : experts with houses ; and I went in with them. And I suppose I was fairly happy for a while. The risk, the adventure. It was fine ! We used to select a house, and watch it carefully for a week or two. See exactly who called, and how : visitors and tradesmen. Learn the household’s ways, and the disposition of the rooms. O, and all the rest of it ! Then, we’d get inside, one way or another, and make a haul. So it went on. . . .

“One day we learned that a certain warehouse regu-

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

larly had a large sum of gold in its safe, over night : the proceeds of cash sales effected by town travellers, and brought in after the bank had closed. We went into the matter, and found that it was likely to be quite a worth-while proposition. There was only one unfortunate circumstance : it would be imperative to put the night-watchman out of action somehow. While this was being discussed, and a plan made, I felt a queer stirring of feelings, and surprised the gang by saying suddenly : 'Look here, you'll have to count me out of this.'

"'O, why?' They stared at me.

"'Well,' I said, 'You can think me lily-livered. So I am. I don't mind going anywhere, and doing anything—only there's one thing I *won't* do—and that's kill. The whole success of this job hangs on the watchman being put out—and I won't come in on it.'

"They tried to persuade me ; but I wouldn't give in. God knows I had fallen low enough, but I still had a shred or two of decency, and was determined to hang on to them.

"Then the oldest of the gang—a man named Thompson, said : 'It's just a matter of scruples, then ? Your conscience, isn't it ?'

"'Scruples, yes,' I said. 'If I helped with this job, had a hand in murdering that night-watchman, I'd never have any peace of mind again. . . . You look back over all the jobs we've done, now. Up to this—we've never come up against anyone. No one's been hurt, no one killed. And now you're altering. You're starting out on a new line, and I'm not going to follow.'

"And I turned away and started to put on my overcoat.

"Outside : January was providing a gentle fall of snow. . . . Thompson stood at the window looking

## *Two and Two Make Five*

out. I could see he was thinking deeply. As I opened the door to leave, he came over to me quickly. 'Half a minute. I've got something I want to say to you. Let's go over to the pub and have a drink!'

"In the bar-parlour I said: 'It's no good, Thompie. I've made up my mind.'

"He drew the corners of his mouth down.

"'Don't be so sure. . . . Now, see here: the four of us have hung together like real pals up to now, haven't we? Why shouldn't we go on like it? Don't let us break up the partnership, boy.'

"'I don't want to break it up,' I protested. 'It's only this job I object to.'

"'But think! It means a big thing to each of us, if we pull it off.'

"'Can't help that,' I said. 'Scruples interfere.'

"Thompson looked thoughtfully into his glass of beer for a moment; then up at me.

"'These scruples,' he said slowly. 'If you hadn't them, you'd come in with us?'

"'Of course,' I said heartily. 'I don't want to appear ashamed of my last bit of self-respect—but it interferes.'

"He didn't quite follow that last piece of bitterness. He drained his beer, and rose.

"'Perhaps it can be arranged, then,' he said mysteriously. 'Now we understand each other.'

"'What d'ye mean?' I asked, puzzled.

"'This business of the scruples,' he replied. 'We've got to get them away from you, so you'll be free. Get me? And I reckon I know someone who can do it.'

"'Don't be a fool, Thompie,' I said gently. 'Are you drunk or mad?'

"'Neither,' he smiled. 'Oh, you'll see! . . . Meet me here to-night, at eight, and you'll find out what I



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

mean. I've got to do one or two things now. To-night at eight, boy.'

"He left me, with that; and when we met again, he hardly paid any attention to my questions.

"'Just wait awhile,' he said; 'And you'll know exactly.' . . .

"We took a bus over Waterloo Bridge. Just before we came to the station, we dismounted, and turned into that extraordinary network of mean streets that stretches as far as Blackfriars. I haven't the faintest idea of our route, but for twenty minutes we turned now to left and now to right, to stop finally before a door at the end of a narrow, dark alley. Thompson knocked; and for a moment or two there was silence, then came a clatter of steps over bare boards, and bolts were withdrawn, and the door unlocked. An unshaven face with shifty eyes peered at us.

"'What yer want?'

"'It's me: 'Thompie,' said Thompson; and we were admitted.

"While the bolts were being shot again, we stood in the darkness of the narrow passage.

"'Is the Old 'Un at the back?' asked Thompson.

"'Yes. D'ye want a light?' The key was turned.

"'No. Reckon I know the way. . . . Keep close, boy.'

"That house must have been built on the plan of a rabbit-warren. I don't know how many passageways we traversed, nor how many stairs we descended. And all in absolute darkness.

"'How much farther?' I asked at last. It was a little unnerving. 'We must have walked about a mile.'

"Thompson only grunted, and continued on.

"At the bottom of a flight of stairs, he whispered

## *Two and Two Make Five*

suddenly: 'She's a rum 'un, if ever there was one. They say she's a hundred and fifty, and hob-nobs with devils out of hell. But that's rather piling it on. Still, there's a lot about her you can't explain natural-like. She can help us, if anyone can.'

"Then he threw open a door and called out: 'Where are you, Mother?'

"A burst of shrill laughter rang out, and before it finished there came a scrambling kind of noise, and a door at the end of the room opened slowly, and a bent, misshapen, little figure entered, walking with the aid of a stick, and carrying a candle whose light showed her face plainly. It seemed an incredibly ancient face, scored with innumerable lines. The mouth was toothless, and the jaws champed together ceaselessly. The nose was sharply aquiline, and the eyes were so deeply sunken as to be but two glimmering points of light. Her hair was white and short, and hung in bedraggled wisps. She laughed again; and the candle shook dangerously.

"'O, it's little Thompie, little Thompie come to see me! What does he want? I know he wouldn't come if he didn't want something from me.'

"She put the candle down on the table, and looked from Thompson to me, and back again to Thompson.

"'Here, sit down, Mother, and I'll tell you.' He cleared a medley of rags and papers from an old rocking-chair, and pushed it towards her. 'You're right—as usual. I *do* want something from you.'

"The old hag let out her shrill laugh again, and rocked the chair to and fro.

"'Well, go on,' she encouraged when at length she recovered. 'Only, you know, don't you, what you've got to do, if you want me to——'

"'Yes, of course. And I've brought it.' He drew out a square, paper-covered package from his pocket,

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

and gave it her. She clawed it in both hands eagerly, and picked a hole in the paper. Then she nodded.

“‘Good little Thompie. . . . That’s all right.’

“She fell to incoherent mumbling.

“‘Now, Mother,’ said Thompson.

“She chuckled.

“‘Oh, yes. Tell me. What is it?’

“‘It’s a matter of scruples,’ began Thompson; and embarked on the tale of the warehouse proposition, of the calculated disposal of the night watchman, and of my refusal to join in because of my conscience. . . .

“As I listened to the recital, I wondered what was the drift of it all. Nothing could be done. Thompson was mad to believe something could. If he thought, in some queer way, that by bringing me to this place, he was going to convert me to his own manner of considering murder, he was quite mistaken. I was determined not to alter in the slightest degree.

“‘Now, that’s the whole thing,’ finished Thompson. ‘Tell us: what can you do about these confounded scruples? We’re just not going to let the boy go.’

“He looked at me.

“‘Ah,’ said the old hag, rocking herself slowly to and fro. ‘Maybe I can do something. Maybe I know. . . .’ Then she stopped rocking, and her head fell forward in thought. For several minutes she remained in this attitude; and was so motionless, I was about to nudge Thompson, thinking she had fallen asleep, when abruptly she straightened up, like a released spring, became rigid, and shrilled out her horrible laugh. . . .

“‘Scruples mean conscience; and conscience means soul,’ she wheezed. ‘Yes, that’s it—soul! Get rid of his soul, Thompie, and everything’ll be all right.’

“‘But how get rid of it?’ asked Thompson, in the most matter-of-fact of voices.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

“‘I know how, I know,’ she chuckled.

“‘Here,’ I said. ‘I’ve got a spoke for this wheel. Listen to me. I’m not going to get rid of my soul, for anyone. I want to keep it.’

“‘That’s harder,’ muttered the Old ’Un. ‘Do you really mean it?’

“‘Yes, I do,’ I said. ‘It may be a poor sort of soul, but it’s the only thing I brought with me into this world which I can take away out of it; and it may come in useful on the other side—who knows? I’m not going to run any risks.’

“‘Complications, various,’ she mumbled, and started her restless rocking again; head bent forward.

“‘Boy,’ said Thompson; ‘Don’t be so obstinate. Come now! Be reasonable. . . .’

“‘The idea of him! I shook my head.

“‘It’s no use,’ I said. . . . ‘I wish to goodness you’d——’

“‘Got it!’ broke in the Old ’Un, with triumph. ‘Got it! You can’t object to a detachable soul, now, surely?’ She leant forward, peering at me with her strange-lit eyes.

“‘It all depends,’ I said cautiously. ‘What do you mean? How—detachable?’

“‘Just detachable,’ she chuckled. ‘Take it out of you when you want to do something you know’ll worry your conscience. Do it, and put your precious soul back again, and be as carefree as ever you were before.’

“‘Jove, Mother! that’s great! Just the very ticket!’ cried Thompson, delightedly. ‘Can you manage it?’

“‘Course I can manage it!’ The Old ’Un shrilled. ‘Just wait’; and she rose, took up the candle and went, mumbling and chuckling, from the room.

“‘There, boy! What did I tell you?’ demanded

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

Thompson. 'Isn't she wonderful? If she says she can do a thing—then sure, you can take her word for it. . . . I've seen her do some queer things in my time. But this is one of the best. O absolutely! One of the best.'

"'I want to know more about it,' I said firmly. 'I'm not over-partial to tampering with my immortal soul in this catch-or-miss sort of way.'

"'O, it's all right,' assured Thompson airily.

"'For you, perhaps,' I said. 'But then it's not your soul.'

"'Pooh! You *are* a one-r.' He came over and clapped me on the back. 'It's just a slick arrangement. Simple as can be. Don't you see?'

"'Not altogether.'

"'Well, it's nothing to worry over, for a start. The Old 'Un' 'll show you the way to rout your soul out of your body,—get that? Then—great idea!—you'll be able to do anything you like, and not have a single qualm afterwards. Just go home, and slip your soul back. . . .'

"At that moment the Old 'Un appeared again, and held out to me a small bottle filled with some black liquid; it looked like ink.

"'Here,' she said. 'Put a drop o' this on your tongue, and in a few seconds you'll have your soul out, and lying at your feet.'

"She jiggled the bottle impatiently, as I hesitated to take it. Then, as I stretched out a hand: 'And what do you think it'll look like, eh? Like a bit o' rainbow: all glitter and colour? Or round and white—like a snowball? . . . Ha, ha, ha! Like nothing of the sort! A soul's a strictly utilitarian thing—and it looks like it—looks for all the world like a little white shirt. . . . Ha, ha, ha!'

"She sank into her chair and rocked to and fro.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

“‘And when you want to put it back—it’s easy. Just put it on, as you would a shirt. And it’ll gradually merge into your body.’

“I stared at the little bottle, twisting it round and round in my fingers.

“‘Well, Mother,’ said Thompson, ‘I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again: you’re a marvel.’

“The old hag went off into one of her easy paroxysms of laughter. As we waited for her to stop, suddenly it seemed as though about a dozen other people outside the room joined with her. It was a horrible chorus: some unnameable quality in its ringing shrillness chilled the blood in me. The Old ’Un jerked upright and was silent. ‘Hish!’ She raised a finger. Then she rose with more agility than would seem possible for one of her age and misshapenness. ‘*They’ve* come. I never know just when to expect them. This time, I wonder. . . . because, well, how long? . . .’

“She opened the door. The laughter rushed in and beat about us like a welter of clammy wings. Then abruptly there was silence; the laughter ceased; the door was shut; the old hag gone. . . .

“‘Let’s go,’ I breathed.

“Without a word, Thompson flung open the door through which we had come, and we plunged again into blackness and intricacy: passages, turnings, stairs—apparently without number. Eventually we were brought up before a door.

“As Thompson ran his hand over it, I whispered: ‘How do you know this is the one? How do you know? We may have gone round in a circle; and be back again at that——’

“But Thompson was fumbling with bolts. The door swung open, and it blessedly gave on to the street. We stumbled out, and banged the door to behind us.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

“‘Thank God!’ I cried, with relief.

“Thompson laughed, and took my arm.

“‘What’s all this sudden development of nerves?’ he demanded. ‘I know what you want. Come on; the pubs are still open. . . . I reckon it’s been a most satisfactory evening. . . . You’ve got that bottle all right, I suppose?’ anxiously.

“‘Oh yes, I’ve got the darned thing all right,’ I said, feeling in my coat-pocket.

“‘Good!’ said Thompson.

“And we went into the first pub we came to, and stayed talking till it closed.

\* \* \* \* \*

“I now no longer had any good reason to refrain from taking part to the full in the gang’s activities—provided, of course, that the old hag’s potion proved truly efficacious. For a couple of days, despite Thompson’s incessant urging, I could not bring myself to experiment. The date of the warehouse job was fixed for the coming Friday night; but up to the afternoon I was still engaged in screwing my courage up to the sticking-point. When there remained only a couple of hours before I had to join the gang, I drew out the little bottle, and forced myself deliberately and calmly, to allow a single drop of the liquid to fall on my tongue. The next instant I was coughing violently—that dry impotent sort of cough which ensues upon a mouthful of food having gone down the wrong way. I thought I would never cease; and my body was racked with a wrenching pain. As suddenly as it had begun, the coughing and the pain stopped; and there at my feet lay a white, filmy object. I stooped and picked it up. It was absolutely weightless, and had my initials woven into its gossamer material. It was, indeed, just like a

## *Two and Two Make Five*

little shirt. I squeezed it in my hand, and it compressed into so tiny a ball, I felt that if I squeezed a fraction harder, it would completely disappear. Relaxing my grip, it expanded to its original size again. . . .

"I suppose, on the whole, I was more amused than anything else. I wondered why ever I had hesitated so long. It was scarcely anything of an ordeal. . . . There it was : my soul, my immortal soul : I was holding it in my hand : I was free of it ! . . . Then I became aware that time was growing short. I was due on the job. What should I do with the thing ? . . . Finally, I hung it up in the wardrobe ; and, locking the door, came away. . . .

"It proved a very successful affair. We had scarcely been two minutes inside the warehouse, when the watchman came along, and we put him out of the way very neatly. The safe was simple, and in less than twenty minutes we had left in good order. The haul was in the neighbourhood of £2,000. I enjoyed the night immensely. It had fallen to me to despatch the watchman. I cracked him on the head, and caught him as he pitched forward. But that was a mighty crack ! I was proud of it.

"Back home : I undressed, opened the wardrobe, took out my soul, and put it on. As soon as it touched my skin : it started to melt, and in a couple of moments was part and parcel of me again. . . .

"I felt very tired, and slipped into bed at once—and slept like a child. And this after accomplishing the bloodiest deed in my life !

"Next morning, I hadn't the slightest twinge of conscience. I read the papers. They all had detailed accounts of the 'Warehouse Tragedy' ; and I shuddered over the 'head battered and lying in a pool of blood' passages ; but, though my memory connected



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

me with the horrible affair intellectually, my emotions did not in the slightest degree. I shuddered quite impersonally. . . .

"That was the first of a number of similar affairs in which I took part. I was easily the most violent of the gang. Only Thompson knew the reason. Some persistent sense of shame made me beg him not to disclose the secret; and he kept it intact. . . .

"We gradually extended our activities; and a new man joined us. He said his name was Beale. He was young—in the early twenties—lithe and nimble and quick. I took to him at once. There was something about him I liked. I couldn't tell just what it was. We became friendly pretty soon. He took a room in the house where I lived; and we went about together.

"He used to say to me: 'I can't quite understand you. Do you know, you seem to be two different people: the Charlton that you are now, who can't bear to see a dog run over in the street—or a cat kicked—or anything of that sort; and the Charlton who can bash a man on the head with a loaded-cane, and not seem to care tuppence afterwards. . . . How is it, old man?' And I'd laugh; and wouldn't tell him how it was. He'd only just joined us; and, though I liked him immensely, I wasn't at all sure how far he could be trusted. That queer sense of shame withheld me from telling him.

"But he kept on asking me: looking at me with puzzled eyes.

"'You're a deep one, Charlton! You're an absolute mystery!'

"About a month later, I gave in, and told him. He just looked at me and grinned: wouldn't believe a word of it. I insisted it was the truth.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

“‘To begin with,’ he said, ‘do you mean to tell me there *is* such a thing as a soul?’

“He held his sides, and bent double with laughter.

“‘O, that’s good! Gorgeous!’ he spluttered.

“We were returning home from a job; and I thought of my soul hanging up in the wardrobe in my room, waiting for me to don it.

“‘Look here,’ I said; ‘I can prove it to you. Nothing easier. Come up to my room. I can trust you all right.’

“At first he wouldn’t come; but I made him. I felt put on my mettle. . . .

“I unlocked the wardrobe door, and took out the white, filmy thing.

“‘There!’ I said, holding it out.

“He stared at it, and then at me; and reached out a hand and took it.

“‘Be careful,’ I said. ‘It’s fragile.’

“‘Thank you!’ he said, with a sudden diabolical laugh that rang through my ears and echoed like thunder in every alley of my brain.

“Then he began to wither away: crumble like a cloud in a high wind. There was a flash of flame, and a belching of sulphurous-smelling smoke that enveloped everything. I reeled, choking, and fell in a faint to the floor. . . .

“When I awoke, it was morning. At first, I could not think at all. Then gradually, memory returned. I broke out into a dreadful sweat—fighting against the realization. I had no soul, no soul! I was different from all other men for ever! Because I had trusted! O, the bitterness of it! Because I had trusted, I was now to pass soulless through life to death; and from death to—what?

“I broke down: fainted again. It was night when

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

I came to ; and I sat on the edge of the bed with the tears raining from my eyes, until the dawn. Then I went out. I went to Italy. And ever since, I've come and gone : now here, now there. . . ."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mr. Esdale paused for a moment.

"What could I say to him? I was speechless. The man's voice carried such absolute conviction that I could not doubt for one moment the truth of his terrible history. . . .

"I gazed over at the trees of the Luxembourg : now looking like a fantastic shadow against the purple, star-shot sky. . . .

"'Good-bye,' he said suddenly.

"I turned. The tears were falling down his long, pallid cheeks ; his thin, bloodless mouth was twisted, A face of direst agony. . . . Before I could reply, he moved away swiftly : and was merged at once in the crowd thronging the Boul' Mich'."

#### IV

I suppose I rather hurried Esdale away at the close of his tale. Oliver had been distracted, it was plain; but I was fearful of over-tiring him.

"We're going at once, old boy," I said; and rose. "Come on, Esdale."

Oliver raised himself on his elbow, and held out his hand.

"Many thanks, Mr. Esdale. It's awfully good of you to have come. . . . There are one or two things I'd love to know. . . . For instance, did you ever —?"

"O, no, you don't," I intervened. "Try and sleep now, Oliver. I'll bring Esdale along some other time, and you can ask him what you will. But you've had enough for to-day. . . ."

I took Esdale's arm.

"Wednesday, at the same time," I said from the door.

Oliver fell back. He really had had enough. His eyes closed.

"Sleep well, old boy," I said.

And we came away.

#### V

On the Wednesday afternoon, when I appeared with Westover, Oliver was sitting up; and was actually smoking a cigarette. He noticed my look of surprise; and said:

"I just felt like it. The first, too, for I don't know how long."

### *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

Westover, in view of his having to hold forth, declined the proffered box.

"Do you mind if I stand?" he asked. "I don't seem able to concentrate my thoughts properly sitting down. And when one is giving an account of such a strange incident as this I am about to give, it would be unfortunate—or more, ruining—to wander, or to lose the thread of the narrative."

So he stood up; and, ignoring Oliver and me the whole time that he spoke, gazed absorbedly out through the window on the chestnut tree, and the long lawn.

*Mr. Westover's Tale of the MS. Prelude in C Minor*

Only one person of my acquaintance knocks for admittance on my door with enough cheerful vigour to burst it in. So, when the assault began at about nine o'clock on a calm evening in last June, I hastened to save the door from ignominiously bowing down before Tommie Leason, by answering the summons at once.

Leason came in, grinning like the overgrown school-boy that he is; and placed his opera hat disrespectfully on the obviously outraged head of my New Guinea idol.

"I've come," he announced; "to learn the result."

Forthwith, he stretched himself languidly on the chesterfield, and proceeded to light a cigarette.

"Alas," I said. "My garments are rent; ashes are upon my head."

"Don't say the miserable old skinflint has left you nothing?"

"I can't say that," I moaned; "but the something he *has* left me is practically nothing."

"My poor Rex!"

My eccentric grandfather had died; and I had had expectations. . . .

"'Poor' is the word," I agreed.

"Tell me all about it," demanded Leason.

"There's so little to tell. I'm left what he was pleased to term his 'dearest possession.'"

"Ah!"

"Nothing of the sort, my dear fellow. It's simply a rotten piece of music in manuscript."

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"Good Lord! Is that all?"

"Absolutely. Hence the rent garments and the ashes."

"Still, I wonder? Are you sure it's worth nothing? Who's it by?"

"Someone or other called Restinya. Ever heard of him?"

"No. Have you?"

"No."

"If only it had been by Beethoven, or one of those other famous old Johnnies," said Leason; "it would have been worth a bit, you know."

"Well, it isn't—so there you are. . . . O, it's a cruel world!"

Leason rose, and paced up and down.

"I wonder why he said it was his dearest possession?" he asked.

"Heaven knows! He was a weird old bird, you know. Quite decent, and all that; but you never quite knew where you were with him."

"Have you got the thing by you?"

"The manuscript, do you mean?"

I opened a drawer and rummaged.

"Here you are. It looks fairly old, doesn't it? 'Prelude in C Minor.' And here, at the side, just his name: Restinya. . . . I wonder what it's like? You don't play, Tommie, do you?"

"Not a note. . . . Look here, there may be more in this than you think, old man."

"As usual, you're the bright little optimist of the party."

"Well, why not? As usual, you're the pessimist; and you've absolutely no reason for the attitude. Whereas I, distinctly—By jove, I've got it! I know just the man for the case! Old Eckersley. Yes!"

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"But what can he do? Who is he?"

"He knows all that there is to know about music. He'd be able to tell you straight off who this fellow—what's-his-name?—Restinya, is, or was. And whether this manuscript's worth anything; and how to dispose of it—if it is. And all the rest of it!"

"Sounds all right. Where does he live?"

"Down near Barling-on-Sea. I'll take you down to him. What about to-morrow?"

"You know perfectly well I'm leaving for Rome to-morrow morning."

"Lord, I'd clean forgotten. So you are. What a pity! . . . Well, what's wrong with now? What's the time? Half-past nine. . . . That's all right. I'm due at the Maurice's; but it'll do if I turn up about twelve. We can get down to Barling in an hour."

"Wait a bit, wait a bit! How you do prattle! First of all, how the deuce——?"

"First of all, nothing of the kind. I know all the objections you're going to raise. You were going to say how the deuce could we get down to Barling, weren't you? Well, I've got the car outside. That's that."

"Tommy! If you don't let me get a word in, I'll brain you."

"Spare me!"

"My dear idiot: we simply can't drop in on a fellow at about eleven at night for a musical opinion. Especially as I've never met him; and I bet you don't know him very well."

"I've met him several times; and know him well enough to know he's quite unconventional, and wouldn't mind a scrap our turning up suddenly. Then, further: I think he'll be jolly interested. Touch his vanity, you know. And, after all, the manuscript may turn out a winner, who knows?"



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

I gave in. One last objection occurred to me as I looked out a light overcoat, and I paused.

"But how am I going to get back to town again?"

"O, there'll be a train," said Tommy lightly.

"Yes, but will there? I can't be left stranded, you know. I've got to be at Victoria fairly early in the morning, remember."

"Well, what about telephoning to find out?"

He telephoned; and there was a train at twelve-twenty.

"Now, come on," said Tommy.

And soon we were speeding through the night. For a quarter of an hour, London refused to leave us, then, tiring of our persistence, suddenly dropped away; and we were on a white road arched over with trees. The air was sweet, I remember, with new-mown hay; and the moon was at its half.

It was barely ten-thirty, when we pulled up.

"Here we are," said Tommy. "Not bad. Under an hour."

The house lay back from the road, and seemed entirely surrounded by a belt of pine-trees. A winding drive led to the front door; and I was relieved to see several of the ground-floor windows lighted.

Tommy rang the bell, and as we waited, I heard plainly the gentle murmur of the summer sea.

"It must be quite near," I said.

"Just at the back of the house. There's a kind of a long shrubbery; and then cliffs."

A maid admitted us; and Tommy was asking for Mr. Eckersley.

Presently, a door at the side of the hall opened, and a tall, grey-haired and grey-bearded man advanced.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," he declared, shaking hands with Leason. "And I've been feeling bored all the evening."

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Tommy introduced me ; and continued quickly :

"We've come to see if you'll help us. You're just the man, you know. It's about music. Rex has just had a legacy, from his grandfather, of a manuscript of a prelude—by someone he's never heard of—but his grandfather in the will called it his dearest possession. Rex being, like myself, perennially hard-up, wants to know if it's worth anything. He's got it with him here now. He goes abroad to-morrow morning : and to-night was his only chance of seeing you—so I insisted he come—I knew you wouldn't mind."

"A pleasure ; quite a pleasure," assured Eckersley.

"Now, Rex will show you the thing, and tell you anything else there is to tell—I've got to go. Due back in town, as soon as I can get there. . . . Rex, old man, awfully sorry I can't wait to hear the verdict. Good luck, anyhow. Drop me a line. Good-bye. See you when you get back from Rome."

He moved to the door, and Eckersley saw him off.

When he returned, I apologized for my unconventional conduct ; but he wouldn't listen.

"O, no ! Please !" he held up a hand laughingly. It was a fine hand. "I'm most curious about this manuscript. . . . Come into the music-room."

He led the way into a large, candle-lighted room. At one end was a french-window, through which I could see the moonlight on a stretch of sea. A grand piano stood at one side ; and here and there were music-stands and piles of music. A 'cello rested against a chair. I was given whisky and made comfortable in a deep chair. A large black cat came towards me : a friendly, wonderful beast with absinthe-coloured eyes. Presently it sprang on to my knees, where, after some preliminary pawing, it settled luxuriously, and fell asleep.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"Here is the manuscript," I said; drawing it from my pocket. "It's by one Restinya. Do you know the name?"

"Restinya!"

Eckersley, leaning back easily, suddenly stiffened. The next instant he sprang from his chair, and stood over me greatly excited. His eyes glowed, and his whole body seemed to quiver.

"Restinya," he stammered. "Are you sure?"

He almost snatched the manuscript from my hand, and taking it over to a cluster of candles, pored over it for a while in silence.

When he looked up, he said in a queer voice:

"But this is almost incredible good fortune! To think, after all these years. . . ."

He came over to me.

"You know nothing about it?" he asked. "The Prelude? Restinya?"

"Absolutely nothing. But you know something? I'm most eager to hear," I said, surprised and gratified at his reception of the manuscript. I felt that, after all, his interest justified my intrusion. I said as much.

"My dear man, don't talk of intrusion," he said. "But it's simply too wonderful that you should bring this along with you. . . ."

He drank his whisky, and then sat down.

"I'll tell you all that I know. It isn't much. About two hundred years ago, this Restinya, a musician, came to live near Swanage, in Dorset. No one knew from what country he came originally—but rumour insisted that he had lived, by turns, in Italy, Germany, Russia, France and Spain—and that for some unknown and strange reason he had been compelled to flee from each. It is certainly true that he had living with him, in this house in Dorset, an Italian, a German, a Russian, a

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Frenchman and a Spaniard. It was declared that he was instituting a new music, and that he planned to sow the seed of it all over Europe: hence his international coterie. He was the master, and they were sitting at his feet. But, strangely, nothing ever came of it. There was never any public performance of Restinya's works, nor of his disciples'. And very suddenly and mysteriously, one night, the whole of the household disappeared. A tradesman calling in the morning, found the doors wide open, and no one to answer his knocking. He entered, and found the first couple of rooms in complete confusion. Growing alarmed, he left and brought neighbours back. They searched the house, and the surrounding country—vainly. And from that day onward the mystery was never solved. Of course, horrible tales went about, as was only natural. What became of Restinya's works, and his disciples', also, alas, has been a mystery. . . . At various times, since, the recovery of a portion of a Sonata, or of a Symphony, has been reported in different parts of the world; but the reports have always proved baseless on examination. And now, you appear, with a complete Prelude! And it seems genuine all right. Quite genuine! Ah, you can't appreciate what that means to the musical world! Perhaps here is the solution of part of the mystery: we shall learn what Restinya's new music was! O, it is wonderful!"

He was silent for a moment, then rose.

"I want to play it. But it's a risk. I wonder——?"

"Do play it," I said.

"Yes; but—you see, it's a real risk. From what I've heard of Restinya anything might happen. Simply anything. . . . Terrible things have been hinted. . . . How's your nerve?"

I laughed.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"Pretty good. Don't worry about me: I'm game for anything."

"Splendid!"

Eckersley patted me on the back.

"Tell me: what do you expect to happen?" I asked curiously.

"Really, I don't know. But I think it's best to be prepared."

He opened a drawer of a bureau.

"Take this. It's loaded in every chamber. I've another in my bedroom. Just excuse me a moment—while I get it."

"Hullo! this looks like business, proper business," I thought. "Pussy," I whispered, tickling the cat's chin with the unpleasant-looking muzzle, "I think we're in for something uncommonly like an adventure."

It opened lazy eyes, and closed them again: implying quite clearly that the only adventure it desired to undertake was a further depth of sleep.

Eckersley returned, and going to the piano, placed his revolver at the side of the keyboard.

"Now, what else?" he mused. "Ah, the window!"

He threw open the french-window.

"I think that's all. Surely? . . . Don't move, or do anything, until I finish. I want to play the whole thing. . . . I'm going to start."

He had scarcely finished the first half-dozen bars when I found myself repressing a cry of "Stop, stop!" I felt a strange pricking sensation in my flesh, and could hardly refrain from squirming in my seat. Eckersley proceeded; and the tingling died away, and in its place came a flashing of horrible moods. The most evil ideas surged into my mind, and passed. Gradually, one idea grew. I felt it swelling in my brain: bellying larger and larger. I wanted to kill! I felt the sweat break

## *Two and Two Make Five*

out on my forehead. I kept clenching and unclenching my left hand. In my right, I held the revolver. Almost I levelled it at Eckersley. My God! But I lowered it again, desiring rather to strangle him with my hands. . . . Then suddenly, I saw that the music was solidifying! I forgot my lust to kill in the weird sight. The notes were rising slowly to the ceiling in the form of a dense, grey-green mist. Already the top of the room was hidden by a whirling amorphousness. A loathsome odour was rapidly making breathing a torture. I stared at the ceiling, and saw the mist gradually take monstrous shape. The half-created Thing circled swiftly, blindly: I glimpsed a long, sinuous body; a great head with gaping bottom jaw. . . . The next moment It had dashed out the cluster of candles that gave the main light of the room, and I could only see It a moving blackness among the shadows that hid the ceiling. . . . The stench became intolerable. I started to choke; and felt the blood gather rushingly to my head. Then, abruptly, Eckersley finished.

The Thing came down to the floor. It capsized a couple of music-stands; then came a smashing of wood and the snap of strings—and I knew It had trampled the 'cello.

The next moment, It made for the french-window. There was a crash, as It came against one of the frames, —then It was outside, and we could see It in the moonlight scrambling swiftly over flower-beds, making towards the shrubbery. Eckersley recovered his self-possession first.

"Quick!" he shouted, scrabbling in the semi-dark for his revolver. "After it! It mustn't get away!"

We tore out into the garden, firing as we went. I fired twice, and Eckersley once. We ran through the gardens, into the shrubbery. Ahead, the sound of

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

a breaking of boughs and snapping of twigs guided us.

At that moment, the moon glided into a deep bank of cloud ; and we couldn't see the way. My left sleeve caught in a broken branch, and as I raced on, I heard the rip of the material.

"Mind ! we come out suddenly on to the cliffs," warned Eckersley. "There's a fissure or two hereabouts." . . .

We went warily.

"Stop ! Listen !" I said suddenly.

Eckersley pulled up, panting.

"Eh ? what ?"

"Listen, no noise. Where is It ?"

The sea's murmur, only the sea's murmur. Where was the Thing ?

"Perhaps it's lying in wait, near by ?" I suggested ; and a cold thrill rose up my spine. I held the revolver ready. . . .

"Perhaps—these fissures," said Eckersley. "Confound that moon ! If only it'd come out."

He stamped around.

We listened again : only the sea's murmur. . . .

At length the moon emerged.

"It may have gone over the cliffs ? What do you think ?" I went to the edge, and looked down. It was a couple of hundred feet to the sea. I saw nothing untoward.

"These fissures," repeated Eckersley. He was walking around one of them, bending down. "Yes, by God !" he cried. "Look here."

I went over.

"See all these marks leading up to it ; and here : on the edge, and for a couple of feet down. . . . The Thing's dropped in ! There's a passage at the bottom,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

connecting with the water, at high-tide. . . . It's been swept out; and if it wasn't killed by the fall, it'll be drowned, by now, by the sea. We'll have to let it go at that."

We looked at each other.

Eckersley appeared white and shaken; and for my part, I felt the same.

"So that's the music Restinya made?" I broke out. "By God, what a devil incarnate he must have been! No wonder he and his friends all disappeared one night. It doesn't take much imagination to reconstruct the cause." . . .

But Eckersley scarcely replied.

In silence we returned to the house; and having picked up and lighted the candles, surveyed the room. It looked chaotic: chairs, music-stands, and a small table overturned; the shattered 'cello, the broken window. . . . Eckersley stooped down in the centre of the room.

"Tony!" he said. "Dead?"

The black cat: the friendly, wonderful beast with absinthe-coloured eyes.

"Yes," I said. "I did it. Throttled him. I simply couldn't help it; while you were playing. He was on my lap, you know. And that devilish music! I wasn't myself. I wanted to kill someone, and I killed him. . . . I love cats, too. I'm most awfully sorry. . . . Do you understand?"

"Of course! There. . . . While I was playing, I felt exactly the same. . . ."

He took up the body, and carried it out of the room. When he came back, he went to the piano.

"Hullo! Have you taken the Prelude?"

I nodded.

"There it is," I said grimly, pointing to the hearth.



### *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"No!" he cried. "O, no! You haven't burnt it?"

He bent over the fireplace, staring at the little heap of ashes, and wringing his hands.

"Yes."

"But it was unique!" he lamented. "The only extant work! And priceless!"

"Such a damnable monstrosity should never have come from the womb of an artist," I said. "I don't care how unique it was; nor how priceless! And I don't mind going down to posterity as one of the Greater of the Philistines, on the strength of my act."

Somewhat hurriedly I left him then, in the midst of his wreckage: left him inconsolable for the grievous loss Art had sustained.

I had barely ten minutes to catch my train. . . .

## VI

When I appeared the next time, I found Seagrave with Oliver.

"What a wonderful day it is," I cried; "Summer's replacing Spring. Makes one think of boating on the river; of swimming in calm seas; and all that sort of thing."

"I'm just telling Oliver," said Seagrave, "that I'm going to move him in a day or two. It's high time; the seaside's the place for him now. He's been in this room long enough."

"Good, Walter! I'm glad you're putting your foot down at last. I think we've both been pandering to him too long."

Oliver smiled. There was a hint of colour in his cheeks, just a hint; and his eyes were losing their old apathetic expression. There was no doubt that the dear fellow was beginning to pick up again. . . .

"I've brought Mr. Searle along," I said, making the introductions.

"I look forward to these afternoons," declared Oliver. "I think my appetite is growing with what it feeds on."

Seagrave picked up his bag and hat.

"Awfully sorry I can't stay. It's my weekly hospital afternoon. I *never* have any time to myself." . . .

Mr. Searle, rather a pathetic-looking little man, by reason of his absolute commonplaceness, drew from a pocket of his somewhat shabby coat a well-seasoned and comfortable-looking meerschaum, and began to charge it.

### *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

"I've a grudge against Fate," he stated, "and I reckon I can lay good claim to being one of the world's worst-used men. And yet, if you passed me in the street, your glance at me wouldn't in any way segregate me from the rest of humanity——"

This was almost unkindly true.

"—And yet." . . . He sighed. "Well, this is my history."

### *Mr. Searle's Tale of The Portrait-Painter*

I used to be in an Insurance Office. I had started there as office-boy at the age of fifteen, and worked up slowly, by the time that I was forty, to the post of senior clerk in the Fire Department. I don't think I liked the work much ; but as I had never had a chance to try anything else, I suppose I was as satisfied with my lot in life as most people are. So far as I could see, I was going to stay a senior clerk till the directors retired me on a pension.

Then, with thunderbolt suddenness, my whole life was altered.

I remember the morning well—a bleak, foggy February morning. I came down at my usual hour of eight-fifteen to breakfast. There were three letters waiting for me : one was a money-lender's circular ; another was my tailor's account ; and the third was from a solicitor informing me of the death in Cape Town of my uncle, Thomas Searle, and asking me to call at my earliest convenience.

I knew nothing at all about this uncle : he was only a name out of the dim past of my childhood. My wife instantly jumped to the conclusion that, having gone to South Africa, he had duly prospered and died a millionaire—and left all his money to me.

A training of twenty-five years in an Insurance Office in Threadneedle Street does not exactly fit one out with a romantic imagination ; and I remember I smiled gently, and begged her not to build foolish castles in the air. More likely, I said, my uncle had died and left some

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

debts to be settled. Though I wasn't at all sure that I could be held legally responsible, if he had. As for the moral side of the question, I certainly had enough of that brand of problem in my own life without voluntarily accepting more. . . . I called on the solicitor that morning; and for an hour and a half he talked to me, and I came away dizzily. I went back to the office, and sat down at my desk, and just stared at the blotting-paper. I didn't want to laugh, nor did I want to cry: I was queerly dazed and numb. One of the fellows brought a pile of policies along, and put them in front of me. He spoke. I don't know what he said. But gradually I began to realize everything. The dizziness slowly passed. . . . I suppose, for a while, they all thought I had gone mad. Well, so I had! I jumped up, and pranced around the desks, clapping my hands, and laughing till the tears came. I caught up the pile of policies put for my attention, and hurled them into the air: they rained down all over the department. Then I fell into my chair: limp with excitement. The next moment, the whole office was gathered fearfully about me. The typists huddled together; and all the fellows simply goggled at me, their jaws dropping. For a couple of seconds it was quite a tableau; then the glass door of the manager's office opened, and Mr. Hardy, looking very stern, was demanding the meaning of it all.

I recovered my poise.

"Forgive me, sir," I said. "I just couldn't help myself. You see, I've just learned I'm a millionaire."

The typists huddled closer together at that; and a shiver seemed to pass through everyone.

Mr. Hardy exchanged glances with his assistant.

They were really doubting my sanity in earnest now. I had to laugh at their expressions. I pulled out the solicitor's letter.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

"Look here. My uncle's died, out in South Africa. He had half-a-dozen farms and a mine. And they've all come to me. I'm worth a million!"

A great deal of explanation followed; but I cut it as short as I could. Once convinced, they were all clapping me on the back and wringing my hand. Eventually I got away, and went home.

"My dear, my dear!" I cried. "Where are you? We're millionaires!"

She took it quite calmly.

"Didn't I tell you so? You wouldn't believe me. I knew it!"

"Just think! Millionaires!"

"A whole million, really?"

"A bit more, I believe."

She broke down then, and burst into tears. . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

I had always been interested in painting. It had been the great dream of my youth to become an artist. Unfortunately I had about as much talent as would go on a threepenny piece; and, despite my inclinations, realized the fact. I had dabbled with water-colours, but had long since given up the practice. Having reached middle-age, I had accustomed myself to smile at the dreams and ambitions of my youth. But it was always a wry smile. . . . Now that I had become wealthy—the old thoughts drifted back into my mind again. With determination I put aside the idea of taking up painting seriously; but realized I was now able to do what I had always longed to afford to do: help struggling young painters.

Accordingly, I began to attend all the exhibitions, and make purchases. I commissioned a portrait of my wife and myself. This was the first. After that:

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

I was always commissioning portraits. I liked the sittings, and the conversation that ensued during them. The business gave me an air of distinct importance. I felt I was really helping on the great cause of Art. I used to catch myself posing every now and then. Perhaps it would be sitting at breakfast: you know, left arm lightly resting on the table, holding a folded newspaper; the pile of letters awaiting opening, and behind, a glimpse of flower-beds through the window. . . . Or it would be in tweeds, standing by the Narcissus fountain in the sunken garden, leaning carelessly against the fluted coping. . . .

I had myself painted all ways. . . .

One afternoon, at tea-time, a young man called to see me. He was tall and thin and dark, with the most compelling eyes I have yet seen in any human being. Looking into them, I felt absurdly, completely, in his power. He explained he was a portrait-painter, and had come to see whether I would allow myself to be painted. He had read of me in the papers, and seen a photograph. He was a foreigner of some sort; and mentioned that from where he had come, it was impossible for an artist to make a living. He had always looked to England, to London. He felt sure that his portrait of me would greatly help to make his name; not so much, he admitted (O, he didn't flatter me!) because my face and head presented any problem to him, but my romantic acquisition of sudden wealth would most certainly ensure the portrait's getting a fair meed of publicity. So far as the critics were concerned, he felt confident his work would interest them. . . . Would I be so good? Of course, he knew I had many calls on my time, but——? I couldn't have held out against him, even had I desired to do so. The man's personality was overwhelming. To tell the truth, in

## *Two and Two Make Five*

some strange way, I felt a little afraid of him. When I became aware of this feeling, I laughed at it, and reasoned with it, but could not dismiss it. . . .

He asked for only three sittings.

"That's very few?" I said, with surprise.

"I work quickly," he explained.

We arranged, straight away, the dates. The work would be completed within three weeks. . . .

With no little trepidation then, the following Monday I took up my pose on the dais that had been constructed for the purpose in the library.

He worked in silence all the morning, allowing me frequent rests. During these stays in the proceedings, he kept by his easel: now staring at me, and now at his work. When the gong went for luncheon, he put down his brushes, and said:

"Thank you. It's going very well indeed."

"Ah," I said, clambering down. "End of the first sitting, eh? May I see?"

He stood aside, and I looked for some moments at the beginnings of myself on the canvas.

During the sitting I had been very conscious of his concentration: I had distinctly felt it drawing something out of me. For all the world as though bits of me were steel, and he were a magnet. A weird feeling. . . . I felt a little shaken. . . . Towards the end of the week, I sat again. It was early afternoon. And again I felt, but now in a more accentuated manner, that uncanny drawing-out power of his terrific personality. As the afternoon wore away, I became acutely aware that, with each stroke of his brush, he was *literally* taking something of me away and placing it mercilessly on the canvas. I felt myself receding—ebbing, little by little, away. I tried to oppose the influence: it became a kind of tug-of-war between us; and I, the weaker, the



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

gradual loser. I was afraid ; and yet could do nothing. And, further, I knew that, with every passing minute, my capability to do anything to stay him and save myself was becoming less and less. . . .

I slowly realized the dreadful truth : he was—consciously or otherwise—robbing me of my life, in order to create a work of art !

I mumbled once : “ Here, stop ! You can’t do this, you know ! I’ve as much right to live as you.”

He appeared immersed in his work.

“ Did you say anything ? ” he asked, after a moment ; and looked at me with his unflinching eyes.

“ No,” I said. “ No. . . . But I’m feeling a bit tired. . . . ”

He kept me for another ten minutes, then let me go.

I went up to my room, and fell on the bed : weary through and through.

I slept for an hour ; and when I awoke it was to an unreal life. I was a divided personality : half of me on the canvas downstairs in the library, mixed with pigment, and surveying continuously and monotonously a section of book shelves ; three-quarters of a window ; and portion of the garden beyond ; and the other half of me here, stretched on the bed, able to move, but feeling abominably weak, and having a sense of emptiness and strange buoyancy. . . . At dinner that night, my wife said :

“ You’re looking very thin and white, my dear. And your voice is a mere whisper ! Whatever’s the matter ? You’re not yourself at all.”

I wasn’t myself at all : I was only half myself. But I felt ashamed somehow or other ; and couldn’t bring myself to tell her the truth. . . .

I lived in dread of the coming Wednesday : the day of the final sitting. I tried to escape—suggested to my

## *Two and Two Make Five*

wife that we should go away, as I wasn't feeling well—but she had taken a liking to the painter, and wouldn't hear of my disappointing him.

"Just let us wait until Wednesday, and you've had your sitting—then we'll go. The poor man is expecting to make his name with the portrait; and it's so near the end now." . . .

I hid myself on the Wednesday—like a child. It was foolish of me, of course—since even though I escaped that day, I should have to face another day, and give the sitting willy-nilly.

Anyhow, they found me; and I made an absurd excuse. . . .

As soon as I mounted the dais, he began. He said nothing at all, just painted. . . . All the afternoon he worked; and when he dropped palette and brushes, he had me completely on his canvas. I was unable to move or speak. It was like being enfolded in a net: the pigment was just that—a fine-meshed net—and held me absolutely rigid. I can't describe the sensation. I was imprisoned tightly, and yet was not in any way cramped. I was comfortable enough physically. I saw everything in front of me, and heard every sound. As the fellow peered at me, and touched me with the tip of a fine brush, now here, now there, I stared back at him. And I wanted to speak; I wanted dreadfully to say, "Now you've done it! Are you happy? And what about me? What's going to happen to me? I'm not going to stop on this canvas always! I'm not, I'm not!"

But there appeared no way of escaping from the situation.

Strangely enough, I hadn't the slightest resentment against my snarer. I couldn't rouse the least spark of anger. I regarded him with a very real fear, and a great admiration. . . .

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

We're strange creatures, we men and women ! . . .

The next thing that happened was my wife's appearance for inspection.

She looked at me closely, screwing up her eyes.

"My word, it's great," she cried. "It's exactly like him, I declare ! It's as though he were really there."

"I *am* really here ! I am !" I wanted to shout. "Can't you see I am ?"

Then I heard her ask : "Where *is* Mr. Searle ?"

The painter answered : "I haven't seen him. He's disappeared."

A footman was asked. Then all the footmen and maids. Later, a search-party was organized to go through the house and grounds.

That night, the police were informed ; and the mysterious disappearance was reported in the papers. This was a little wave of publicity ; and, of course, on the crest of it, the portrait was duly exhibited and attracted a large crowd for a fortnight. The painter leapt into prominence, naturally enough, and his name was established. And for that fortnight I had to endure the stares of all kinds of people, most of them vulgar in the extreme. I could not escape ; and I was now resigning myself to my fate. I wondered whether I would live for ever—or, that is, until the painting mouldered away ; or whether I would go on getting older, and die, at the appointed time, in my net of paint, bounded by the gilt frame ? . . .

At the end of the fortnight, I discovered that I had been purchased by the Gallery of Modern Art ; and, accordingly, I was placed on exhibition there in Pall Mall. O, the monotony, the dreary monotony of my existence from them on ! Day after day, people passing and re-passing : not so many during the week, but on Saturdays, and Sundays overfilling the place !

## *Two and Two Make Five*

Even now, I cannot bear to think of that period in my life without a shudder. The rooms were badly lighted—possibly on the official principle that the less seen of modern art the better—and were hideously ugly. The Gallery might very well have been a prison. And what a prison in which to hold the Spirit of Beauty! . . .

For twenty years I was there: in the same room. Imagine it: year after year, for twenty years! And I would have been there still—save for a merciful Providence, who must, at last, have taken pity on me, and sent a most efficient fire one windy night, that gutted the Gallery. The small room in which I hung was one of the first rooms to receive attention; and as the flames leapt about me, I hardly dared hope that this was the means of my release. The paint blistered and melted and ran, and I sprang up out of its broken net, free, free!

I was scorched, and suffered minor burns; but I emerged from the ordeal a reinstituted whole human being once more. . . . Luckily, I found I had a few sovereigns in my pocket; and feeling very hungry, I went to a restaurant. It was a supper I had, since the hour was close on midnight. As I sat down to a table, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a mirror, and started: I had not aged in the least during my twenty years' captivity! By rights, I should have looked my age of sixty-five, but there I was: still forty-five! . . . My thoughts turned to my wife. What a surprise for her! It would be in the nature of a shock, no doubt; and perhaps I would be wise not to go out immediately to my town house and show myself at this late hour; but wait until the morning. . . . Having decided on this course, I went to a small near-by hotel for the night. . . .

Next morning, I realized to the full the delight of being free again; and for a couple of hours utterly

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

abandoned myself to the novelty of being able to bend my body, swing my arms, double-up my legs, and turn my head from side to side. I rolled about the floor like a puppy; and did somersaults, talking incessantly to myself and laughing uproariously. A chambermaid's intervention calmed me eventually, and I settled the bill, and came away.

It was curious being admitted as a stranger to my own house. I was shown into the morning-room; and noticed at once that everything was the same as when I had last seen it: not a chair nor a vase deviated from its old position; though over all lay that intangible greyish mantle of dignity and soberness acquired by passing successfully through a couple of decades. . . .

Thinking thus, suddenly it struck me: a couple of decades! I had not for a moment imagined that my wife had died in the interval, nor re-married, nor that she had disposed of this house, and acquired another. I had taken quite for granted the fact that none of these things had occurred. I had inquired (withholding my name) at the door for "Mrs. Searle"; and the footman had not corrected me. Really, I might have considered the chances against! . . .

At that moment the door opened, and my wife entered. Her appearance took me somewhat aback,—though I had of course made allowances. The years had not treated her kindly: she looked worn and frail. She had become very thin; her face was pathetically lined, and her hair white. For a moment I just stared at her; then, as she advanced, something in her walk, a gesture she made with her hand, and a quick sideways lift of her head, banished the strangeness of her age for me, and I saw my dear wife as I had always known her.

"Ellen, Ellen, my dear!" I said chokingly, holding out my arms.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

She stopped abruptly.

"Ellen, don't you know me? Robert? O, my dear, I've come back to you!"

She drew nearer, and adjusted spectacles.

"Who are you, sir?" she demanded at last. "And how dare you address me in this way?"

A chill struck at my heart.

"Don't you recognize me: your own husband? Has twenty years so completely wiped your remembrance of me away?"

"I think you are mad," she said sharply; and moved to the bell.

"Don't!" I cried. "Don't ring! Hear what I have to say first. . . . Look at me! How can you see me, and say I am not your own husband? Don't you remember how I used to look?"

The intense seriousness of my manner impressed her; for she drew away from the bell.

"Yes, there's a little resemblance, I admit," she said. "But you must be mad to make such a preposterous claim. My husband died years ago. Had he been living to-day, he would have been three years my senior. and you are in your prime of life—mere middle-age."

"Yes, I know, I know," I said; "but I can explain the reason. I can tell you exactly how it all came about." . . .

"I'm afraid I haven't the time to listen," she interrupted coldly. "I must ask you to leave at once. I can't understand your motive in calling; but if it is money—you'll get none from me, I assure you. And be glad I don't send for the police."

She rang the bell, and moved to the door.

The complete hopelessness of it all suddenly burst in on me. I had no case whatsoever. I would be considered mad, if I persisted, and possibly find myself

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

shut away. Here I was now, being ordered out of my own house, and unable to uphold my rights or defend myself in the least.

The ingeniousness of Fate's machinations against me became so apparent that I had to give an admiring laugh.

A footman opened the door.

"If you show yourself here again," said my wife, standing aside, "I'll give you in charge immediately. . . . William,"—to the footman—"remember this man; if he comes back—send for a policeman at once."

"Very good, madam," said William. . . .

Alone in London, now, and without funds, there was only one thing for me to do in order to continue to live—I would have to work. With good luck I managed, the following week, to get a berth—with a Fire Insurance Company. I don't like the work much—I never have; but I suppose I've got to be satisfied. One can't fight Fate. I've given that up long ago. But I hate her! . . .

So the Wheel of Circumstance, you note, has now completed its full circle—so far as I'm concerned. I only hope it won't attempt another revolution. I've had enough of it. . . .

## VII

"Oliver, I've brought Mr. Hassell along to-day," I said. "This is our last *séance*. You know?"

Oliver and Hassell shook hands.

"Yes, alas! Walter came in again after you left last night, and told me he's arranged for me to go down to Bournemouth to-morrow. Ugh! Bournemouth!"

"O, go on with you," I laughed. "I've no pity at all. Bournemouth's just the place for you."

"Walter's such a tyrant," sighed Oliver.

"Just what you need," I rejoined. "He's not nearly tyrannical enough. Nor am I, for that matter. . . . But you've really picked up a lot, in this last week, old boy." I was secretly giving myself some of the credit for his change. Gone was a great deal of his morbid introspection, his listless apathy. He appeared generally more alert and interested.

He looked now at Hassell with an expectant air that gratified me tremendously.

"I wonder what you're going to tell us, Mr. Hassell?" he quizzed. "I've been guessing to myself all the morning. These last few days I've heard some queer tales. I've been fascinated! Now, is yours queer, too?"

"Pretty queer," smiled Hassell. "I hope you won't be disappointed. If you've been wondering what you were going to hear, you know anticipation always exceeds the realization."

"But I'm always a cautious anticipator," said Oliver.



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

“ Well, in that case, you’re an exception to the general rule ; and my way is easier. . . . I’m going to tell you the tale of the last ten years of my life. . . . Here goes, then.”

*Mr. Hassell's Tale of the Water That Quenched Thirst*

Ten years ago, at the age of twenty-seven, I was still engaged in the delightful pastime of sowing wild oats. But I was coming to the end of the field, and the last couple of furrows. I was to be married the following year. . . .

I had two friends who saw eye to eye with me in the matter of making the most of one's freedom while one still possessed it. One of these—his name was Scott, and his work, sculpture—on the occasion of his twenty-eighth birthday, gave a party in his studio. It began early in the evening, and when I left, at about two in the morning, showed no signs of abating. Scott's studio lay in that part of Fulham which clutches grimly on to the skirts of Chelsea, in a dogged attempt to pass as a part of it. I had diggings in Notting Hill Gate; and the Underground being long closed, and a taxi being expensive, I had no other course open to me than to walk.

I was very drunk. With a gentle, undulating, wave-like motion the pavement rose up under my feet, and receded: rose and receded. . . . Bacchus is nothing if not a generous deity. Under his influence, I saw half a dozen of everything—the moon, the street-lamps, and so on.

My throat felt parched. I thought out a conundrum, which seemed excellent at the moment. It ran somehow like this: When is a lime-kiln plus the Sahara like a land

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

dripping with milk and honey? And the answer was : When it's compared with my throat. . . .

I wanted a drink. Badly, I wanted one—of water. Water, blessed water. . . .

I looked around for a drinking-fountain. Had the District Council a soul, I declared passionately, they'd have set one at every other corner.

But they hadn't a soul.

There wasn't a fountain to be seen. I went on and on, searching vainly. My throat seemed on fire. I felt like to die of thirst, dropping by the way. I would never reach Notting Hill Gate. Sadly I pictured the next day's lurid headlines in the papers : "Man Dies of Thirst In Fulham. Could Have Been Saved By a District Council Drinking-Fountain. Questions To Be Asked In Parliament." A great storm of controversy would break over England ; the sluggish national conscience would be awakened ; and the result be a sufficiency of fountains for the whole of Greater London, donated by societies, clubs, institutions and harrowed, kindly individuals. . . .

My soaring fancy was brought abruptly to earth. I had collided with someone. Surprised, foolishly, that another person should be abroad at that hour, I stopped, and repeated my involuntary apology.

It was a little man, and he was leaning against an electric-light standard with an air of infinite patience. I could not see his face, as the wide brim of his hat cast a dark shadow over it. He inclined his head slowly in acknowledgment of my regrets. And then I noticed he was a hawker of some kind : he bore a tray, slung by a strap, in front of his chest. On it was quite an array of bottles, and among them, a printed card. I drew nearer with curiosity to read the inscription. It ran :

*Two and Two Make Five*

THE WATER THAT QUENCHES THIRST  
WHY THIRST?

Why not be free to-day—this minute?

tndlx e fdlstqrbtsmnsttrxbhytlth

“Stop!” I cried. “The words are having a game with me. They’re running away! . . . Or perhaps it’s Bacchus again—over-playful . . . ‘Why Thirst?’ Why, indeed? Not I, your honour. . . . See here, my good man, you’re an angel from Heaven! Where the District Council won’t step in, you do! You deserve a medal or a dukedom or something! . . . Give me a bottle!”

“Half a crown, sir,” said the little man.

“And cheap at the price too, I’m sure!” I agreed heartily. “If you were as dry as I am—five bob wouldn’t be too much.”

I secured a bottle with a clumsy hand.

“Ah, the best water, I see,” I said foolishly, holding it up to the light.

The next moment I had the cork out, and was emptying the contents down that importunate throat.

“Ah, ah,” I remarked several times, as an expression of acute relief.

“Here you are,” I said presently. “Any rebate on the bottle?”

Meant to be a joke; but he answered tonelessly:

“No, sir. I’m sorry.”

“Then, farewell, angel of mercy,” I bid. “And may you find more lost souls to minister to in this howling wilderness of a suburb.”

Somewhere between three and half-past, I reached home without thinking more of the incident. Its unique strangeness failed to wake the slightest response in me.

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

Reeling heavily, but noiselessly as possible, from one side of the room to the other, I eventually succeeded in undressing, and slipping into bed: where it was not, I must say, so much a sleep into which I fell, as a deep unconsciousness. . . .

Next morning, I was rather surprised to discover that, though my head ached and my throat felt rough, I had not the slightest desire to do what one usually does on the morning following such a night—pantingly despatch a pint or two of water. At the moment, I refused to believe it, and made for my carafe. But I simply couldn't swallow a mouthful! I shrugged, and betook myself and my giddiness to the bath; and managed to leave a little of the latter behind when I emerged. I pecked delicately at the breakfast, and poured out a cup of coffee. But do you suppose I could drink the stuff? Automatically—seeing it awaiting me—I tried; but without success. . . . My landlady, rather fussily, suspected I didn't approve of her brew.

“Let me make you a fresh pot?” she suggested.

“No, don't trouble, Mrs. Kemp,” I said. “Really, don't.”

“No trouble, sir,” she insisted, and whisked away the pot.

To her concern, the second fared the fate of the first.

I felt apologetic. I hate hurting people's feelings.

“Somehow, I don't feel like coffee this morning,” I said.

“Would you fancy some tea then, sir? A dish o' tea?”

“No, no!” I said hastily. “Nothing at all. I don't fancy anything. . . .”

On my way up to the city I became very thoughtful.

## *Two and Two Make Five*

The events of the night passed through my mind in careful review. . . . And suddenly I went cold all over. That little man with his bottles! The Water That Quenches Thirst! The half-crown I paid; and the bottleful I drank!

The awful thought gradually dominated me that the printed card on his tray told the literal truth. Good heavens! could it be; could it possibly be? I sat in a numbed sort of condition, thinking chaotically. At Mansion House, as in a dream, I got out, and went to the office.

"Jimmy," I said to the boy, "bring me a glass of water."

I passed on into my room; and when the water came, I was almost afraid to put my horrible doubt to the test. Then quickly I seized the glass. . . . The next moment I was spluttering and choking. . . .

"My God!" I breathed, "it's true. I can't drink a drop. I can't drink. I'll never be able to drink again, so long as I live. . . ."

I fell into my chair, and buried my face in my arms. The prospect appalled me. It meant that, in one of the great fundamentals, I was different from all the rest of my kind. I was marked for life—a man apart. . . . My imagination raced on and pictured the future—I would be disliked; then distrusted; ultimately shunned. I had no excuse to offer which would be accepted. Though I had contracted my differing state entirely innocently and unwittingly, I knew that the world is always adamant in its censure of anyone or anything that deviates in the least particular from the normal. The mere fact of not being to blame for the abnormality does not weigh at all with the world, and is ignored. . . .

The telephone-bell rang. It was my *fiancée*. The day before, we had had a slight difference; and I had written

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

a note beseeching her to ring me up and say she had forgiven me.

"Yes, darling, of course I forgive you. And do you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," I said. "I'm a cad. It was all my fault."

"Hush! Come out to tea this afternoon. . . ."

I promised eagerly; and only as I put the receiver down, remembered my dreadful new disability. I felt uneasy. O, whatever would happen? How explain it? Tell the truth, of course; but would she, would she—how would she take it? . . .

The very worst happened when I appeared.

She had made the cakes herself; and the tea was my very favourite Ching-Lee.

I ate a cake, and lifted the cup.

No; it was impossible.

I tried again.

Impossible!

I took another cake.

"Is your tea all right, dear?" she asked, leaning over.

"Er—quite, dearest."

"But you haven't drunk it! How do you know it is?"

"Well, it looks nice," I said nervously.

"It's getting cold, I'm sure," she frowned gently.

I put the cup to my lips. . . .

Damn! I couldn't drink. . . .

"Dear," she asked suddenly, "is anything wrong with you?"

"No. Of course there isn't."

"I got the tea specially to please you," she said.

"And you're not a bit nice."

"I—don't think I'm thirsty to-day," I said weakly.

Then she became angry; said I had hurt her abomin-

## *Two and Two Make Five*

ably ; that I was sulking over our yesterday's difference ; that I was a brute to be so mean. . . .

I tried to explain ; but she wouldn't let me.

She had become very flushed, and looked wonderful. Then gradually the colour ebbed away ; and I thought she was going to faint. I reached out my arms ; but she made a gesture of withdrawing from contact with them.

I kept begging her to hear what had happened to me, to let me explain.

But she held up a hand.

"I've no desire to hear a word. And I think it best that we break off our engagement. I could never be happy with you. My eyes have been opened to the truth in time, thank heaven ! These last two days have shown me plainly. . . ."

She took off the ring, and handed it to me.

I took it dumbly. She went to the door, and opened it : waiting for me to move. At length : "If you don't mind," she said coldly, "I'd like to be alone."

At that, I went. . . .

The next blow that was struck at me occurred the same week.

It was my business to attend to a few of the big country-buyers of timber : to take them down to view our stocks at the Basin, give them lunch ; and, even, sometimes, dine them and go on to a theatre afterwards. They were our largest customers : men who bought from us to the tune of a couple of hundred thousand in the year. They were, most of them, of the big, coarse, jovial type ; and I always got on fairly well with them. Or, at any rate, well enough. . . . But one of them, named Attenborough, was rather a difficult person to handle. He was a cute driver of hard bargains ; a sharp-tongued speaker ; and a conscienceless breaker of whoever stood in his way. He drank about four times as



## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

much as any other man I had ever met ; and had an easy continual flow of smoking-room tales, which he greatly enjoyed imparting. . . .

Well, that was the man. And on the Wednesday I had to take him down to the docks to see a new shipment of pine-logs just arrived. . . . I leave you to imagine what he looked like when I told him, in answer to his "Now, what about a drink ?"—that I wasn't really thirsty.

"What, not thirsty ?" He stopped short, and stared at me : his little blue eyes glinting from the creased folds of his fleshy cheeks ; his bushy, bristling eyebrows arching in amazement.

Then he laughed.

"Here, young man," he roared, "you're joking about serious things. Can't have it, you know ! Can't have it ! . . . Come along."

But in the saloon-bar, it eventually dawned upon him that I had been speaking the earnest truth.

Whereupon he went the nearest shade to royal purple that I am sure it is possible for the human flesh to achieve.

And—well, the result of that morning's work became apparent before evening. Attenborough must have gone at once to my chief, and, in his ruthless way, told him of the incident—probably with embroideries—or, no ! to his mind the fact that I had refused to take a drink with him would really constitute a most offensive insult. So, then, he had been grossly insulted ; rottenly treated by that young puppy of a Hassell—and he demanded my dismissal.

He got what he wanted.

My chief was very kind and very sorry.

"I've got to do it, my boy," he said. "Attenborough's account with us can't be sacrificed. He's too

## *Two and Two Make Five*

big a man. . . . And I always had the impression that you'd have a drink with anyone? . . ."

I didn't attempt to enlighten him. What was the use? The shock of my broken engagement was still with me: I felt too crushed to stand up and defend myself. And anyway, it was useless to attempt a defence. . . . Even supposing I was believed, the job was a drinker's. . . .

I smiled wryly.

"Then—good-bye, sir," I said.

We shook hands. He handed me a cheque.

"Here's six months' salary by way of a little compensation. . . . I'm very sorry." . . .

\* \* \* \* \*

England seemed impossible to me now. I wanted to leave the country; shake off all thought of my immediate past; start a fresh life somewhere. I went to Australia. . . .

At first I got a billet in a timber place; but could not keep it. History repeated itself word for word. . . . I then drifted out into the country; and worked on farms. Sooner or later, at each place, my embarrassing quality became discovered, and I was at once strangely hated. No one chanced to consider me an object for pity. They saw no deeper than the surface, and that was enough for them: at once they drew back. . . .

I became very bitter.

At length, I heard that an exploration party was being formed to pierce the central and north-western parts of Australia. These parts were practically unknown; and the purpose of the party was to discover what natural resources they possessed. I at once conceived the idea of attaching myself to it as a timber-expert. The chief difficulty—and a very grave one—in those sub-tropical

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

parts, I knew, was the scarcity of water. Requiring none at all, I would naturally be a great asset in this direction. . . . I applied at once ; and shortly met the leader, Captain Britten. At first, he was frankly sceptical, and inclined to think me mad. But I persisted ; and eventually won him over. He saw at once what a useful member I would be ; and I came away from the interview definitely engaged. . . .

We started out early in April.

And Disaster went with us—though at first we didn't know it ; and she never left us. We had a long series of misadventures and accidents. Twice we became lost. In the first month, our minerals man died of an adder-bite. And so the catastrophes continued—a melancholy procession. . . .

The final stroke came in the following November. We were on a desert plain, stretching with its sparse crop of saltbush and bluebush from horizon to horizon. A shimmering cobalt sky, and a merciless brazen sun, day after day. And the watercourse upon which we had relied was dry as the surrounding curry-coloured sand. . . . But I won't recall that battle my comrades put up against inexorable Nature ; its details are seared into my memory so deeply I often rise up at night crying out—living those days through again in a torturing dream. . . .

I was the only one of the party to return to civilization. I bore with me all the results of our investigations up to the fatal November. . . . And I found myself a hero ! I was taken utterly aback. I had never imagined that such a view would be taken of the tragedy. But I had greatly underestimated the amount of interest, not only the Australian public, but the whole world, had focused on the expedition's activities and their outcome. . . .

I was given a banquet in the Sydney Town Hall. The Governor and the Lord Mayor and Councillors, the Bar,

## *Two and Two Make Five*

the Army and Navy ; everyone of any importance was present ; you know the sort of gathering : " Representative " they call it. . . .

I had to speak. I was toasted ; I had to respond. . . .

" No wine," I said to my waiter.

" No wine, sir ? " He lifted his eyebrows, wondering if he had heard aright.

The Lord Mayor, sitting beside me, overheard.

" What ? What's this ? No wine ? Come ! "

" No, really," I stammered. " I don't drink."

" Oh, oh. . . . Having something soft, then ? "

They poured me ginger-ale. And I knew they observed I didn't drink it. I could see they were becoming suspicious. After all, I didn't blame them ; the man that doesn't drink isn't to be trusted ; I quite agree. . . .

After the banquet, invitations reached me by every post. I was asked to lecture ; to speak at patriotic meetings ; to address boys ; to open hospitals, and lay foundation-stones ; to lunch, to dine, to attend house-parties. . . . But I refused all firmly.

I had jealously kept the real secret of how I had managed to escape the fate of my poor comrades. A smarting sense of my great difference from my kind made me shrink away, and keep to myself. I went to a remote country town, and hid. . . .

For exactly three weeks, the newspapers contained echoes—in falling cadences—of the " Bush Epic " as they called it. Then, on the twenty-first day following the banquet, the last echo sounded and died away.

It appealed to my bitter sense of humour to know that I was forgotten ; that I had sunk surely and inescapably into a background crowded with such suddenly-risen-and-gone figures as myself. I was very relieved ; very glad. . . .

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

But as time passed, and my money dwindled, I came face to face with the old necessity for working again. . . .

I thought deeply over my position ; and it occurred to me that perhaps it would be the easier course in the long run to acknowledge my defect, and try to make capital out of it, instead of pretending that it didn't exist.

Bernard Shaw says somewhere, I believe, something to the effect that a vice should always be cultivated up to its extreme limit, whereupon it at once becomes a virtue. Being, then, a freak (a horrible, mean little word) it behove me to ascertain the market for freaks.

Mere association of ideas produced immediately the word "circus."

Of course ! a circus was just the place for me ! Why had I not thought of it before ?

Away with my foolish undeserved sense of shame ! Away with my diffidence, with all my shrinking !

I was different from the ordinary run of humans ? Well, I would throw in my lot with the extraordinary run. A freak, I would join with freaks. . . .

I wrote off at once to Barnum and Bailey : the great Circus people in America. Negotiations occupied a bare couple of months ; and I am now on my way over to the States—with a five years' contract in my pocket.

They have stipulated that I shall have to live in a glass cage. But what do I care ? I shall become accustomed to it, in time.

And it is going to be a mighty comfort to live as myself at long last—instead of trying to live as a normal man.

VIII

Six months later I called on Oliver. He was long since his old happy self again.

"My dear fellow," I said, wringing his hand. "The time has come to make a confession to you."

I put down the book I had brought.

"Ah! Something out of your horrible past?" he grinned. "Fine. Go ahead."

"It concerns you," I stated.

"O, is it interesting?"

He picked up my book.

"Hullo!" he cried. "Your new book! Congratulations, old man! Just out?"

"To-day," I said. "Wait."

I put my hand over the leaves.

"My confession," I reminded him.

"The book's more interesting than that," he declared.

"The book," I said with impressiveness, "the book is the confession. Look."

"Eh?" he puzzled.

"Look at it."

He turned the pages, then glanced up at me.

"The Table of Contents," I suggested patiently.

He read out: "The House That Had Never Had A Tenant"; "The Grasshopper and the Last Whim of Mrs. Wellington"; "The Hand Without An Arm"; "The River That Ran Uphill"; "The Detachable Soul"—

## *A Set of Chinese Boxes*

He paused an instant, then went on :

"The MS. Prelude in C Minor"; "The Portrait-Painter"—

He broke off.

"Mark!"

"Now, I'll explain," I offered.

"Do! These tales—and those that Mr. Esdale, Mr. Westover, Mr.—"

"Quite, my dear fellow," I interrupted. "All those tales that you heard when you were ill—when you had made up your mind to die—"

"Nothing of the sort!"

"You *had* made up your mind," I insisted. "Poor old Seagrave was in no end of a state over you. He came along to me at last and said he couldn't save you: you were just going to get weaker and weaker and pass out. He wanted me to try to think of some plan that would rouse you out of your rut: wake you up to a desire to go on with the business of life. He said I was just the man—I trafficked in ideas: I must think of one to save you. . . . And I walked feverishly several times across Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens before one did come to me. The more I thought about it, the better it seemed. I saw Seagrave at once, and he approved—so we set it working.

"I got hold of some actors whom I knew, who were 'resting'; and gave them, each, one of my tales to learn off pat—like a rôle—and I explained to them the whole plan. . . ."

Oliver stared at me with wide eyes.

"And now," I concluded, "you're fit again; the confession's made; and the book's out. Finis. All's well that ends well."

He recovered.

"Spoofed!" he cried. "Absolutely spoofed!"

*Two and Two Make Five*

He began to laugh. I grinned. He caught me by the shoulders and shook me; then fell gasping into a chair.

“O, my! A masterly spoof!”



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