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THE KING OF NO-LAND.

By B. L. FARJEON,

AUTHOR OF 'BLADE-O'-GRASS,' 'BREAD-AND-CHEESE AND KISSES,'
'GOLDEN GRAIN,' 'JESSIE TRIM,' ETC.



I.

A WHITE-ROBED WOOD, BATHED IN
SWEET AIR.

KING SASSAFRAS reigned over the kingdom of No-land. He was crowned in the snow season; and one of the leading papers of the capital, in its enthusiastic comments upon the imposing ceremony, poetically remarked that the soft flakes of snow which floated dreamily in

the air and kissed the earth during the day, were white-winged heralds of welcome sent expressly from heaven to greet the Lord's elect. They were sure indications also, it was said, that the reign of the new King would be a reign of purity and love. A copy of these sentiments, printed upon white satin in letters of gold, was presented to the King, and he read them with a certain kind of pleasure, although he seemed at the same time to be inwardly disturbed by the extravagant praise which was lavished upon his personal virtues and qualifications—being doubtful, perhaps, whether it was deserved. But the sentiments expressed and the similes drawn were decidedly pretty and graceful, and as the writer was satisfied with his work, it is to be hoped his readers also were.

As no further reference will be made to the ceremony of the coronation, let it be here briefly stated that, gorgeous and solemn as it was, the King's thoughts frequently wandered from the brilliant scene of which he was the principal figure. The myriad facets of light, the silks, the laces, the thousands of eyes that gazed worshipfully upon his person, faded from his sight as utterly as if they had no existence, and in their place there came:

A white-robed wood, bathed in sweet air. A cottage in the distance, covered with ivy, whose every snow-rimmed leaf, with its feathery tip, was a marvel of beauty. Nests in the chimneys, with birds peeping out—gratefully, for good store of food was theirs. A modest and beautiful young maid; a grave-

visaged man; an old woman with white hair; and, strangest of all, three little girls, armed with violins and bows, playing quaint old tunes with wonderful grace.

Clang! The trumpet's blast blew these fancies into nothingness, and precious stones and silks and laces reigned again.

No-land was a vast territory, and its inhabitants numbered many millions. Sassafras was the first king of that name, and he came to the throne when he was twenty years of age. There were substantial rejoicings, of course, upon the occasion, and in all the towns and cities and even villages of No-land the new King's subjects made merry and feasted for a week. All the subjects, that is, except those who did not believe in kings and queens; but even they assembled in their way and in their places, and extracted grim satisfaction from the feast of the future, which they painted in colours hard and fast and warranted to wash. Generally, however, the people, being worked into a state of enthusiasm, were red-hot with excitement; guns and cannon were in the same condition; triumphal arches were erected; loyal dinners were loyally eaten; loyal speeches were loyally spoken; mayors, lord mayors, and councillors were in their glory, and each frog thought himself an ox; children were dressed in their Sunday clothes and taken out to see the sights; the theatres were thrown open free to the people, who behaved as the people generally do on such occasions, with much gentleness; and at night the streets were flooded with light. Just be-

fore that time the doctors of No-land had been complaining that things were very bad, and were shaking their heads at each other with ominous looks, being depressed by the healthfulness of the people. But the feasting indulged in by the new King's subjects on his accession to the throne brought on dyspepsia and other ailments, and for many weeks after that event the doctors' pockets were filled with guineas. Then they had hopes of their country, and with cheerful looks declared that the reign of the first Sassafras had commenced most auspiciously.

The father of Sassafras had been a hypochondriacal valetudinarian, and being entirely wrapped up in himself (as most such characters are, whether high or low in station), bestowed no care and but little thought upon his son. Losing his health in the pursuit of pleasure, in which all his intellect was engaged and all his moral and religious affections were buried, he hobbled for years after his lost treasure in precisely the very places where it was not to be found, and growing year after year more querulous and infirm and selfish, he often for months together forgot that he had a child. His forgetfulness was a gain to Sassafras, who, being given into the charge of a number of tutors and time-servers, found life more pleasant than it would have been to him had he been doomed to endure the caprices of his royal father. With this retinue he passed his time until the arrival of the day when the people went into mourning for the death of the King, and wept, and wore crape, and gazed

dolefully at each other, because a ruler who had many vices and no virtues had passed away from among them. At the time of the King's death—the immediate symptoms preceding which were so sudden that he was maddened and confounded when he was told he had but a few hours to live—the heir-apparent was abroad, travelling by command of the King; but the news came to him by wire and courier, and he hastened home, shortly after reaching which he was crowned and made king, to every one's satisfaction apparently but his own. Those who were about him at that period were glad to be relieved of an awkward responsibility, for they found him difficult to manage. This is not surprising, for even during his childhood his tutors and time-servers had had no easy time of it. Young as he was, he had a mind of his own, in which, by some means, notions and ideas not exactly in accordance with his royal station found place. Gentle he was by nature, but he was also rebellious of restraint. Being a very exalted baby, the greatest possible fuss had been made with him from his birth; but even as a baby he seemed to wonder at the oppressive attention which was bestowed upon him. As he grew, this wonder changed into inward rebellion; and from the time that he began to think of things, he chafed and fretted at not being let alone. On one memorable occasion during his boyhood he entered a vigorous protest against this.

He had planned a truant run into the woods, being animated by

an eager desire to climb one particular old elm-tree, through the branches of which, in the summer, the clouds could be seen sailing like fairy ships on a white and blue sea, and among which the birds built their nests and flitted merrily in the sunlight. In the winter the fairy ships sped swiftly onwards before the driving wind, and the birds made themselves warm and snug in their nests. The Prince longed to sit among the higher branches of this tree, with his back against the trunk, and watch the clouds and the birds, and idly muse upon goodness knows what. On a fine summer morning he escaped from the palace as he had designed, and he ran into the forest; but just as he was about to climb the old elm, having selected the particular branches in which he would sit and be enthroned, his tutors and time-servers came running after him, and he had not time to get out of their reach. He was desperately angry.

'Hands off!' he cried, shaking himself free from them.

They stood about him, almost breathless with the run they had had.

'Why,' exclaimed the Prince, 'should I be surrounded in this manner, and be dogged and watched as if I were a slave? Am I a slave?'

They raised their hands in astonishment, and their voices also.

'A slave, your Royal Highness!' they cried. 'You! It is we who are slaves—your slaves, ready to lay down our lives for you.'

'Then,' demanded the Prince,

'why don't you go away and let me climb this tree? See there! Those two branches with their arms folded, looking down upon us. If you look attentively at them, you will see two queer brown faces bending towards us. They are like twin brothers embracing. You don't see anything of the sort? No, that is because you don't care to. But you can't help seeing in what fantastic fashion their twisted limbs are made into the shape of an S, the initial of my name. Nature might have made the symbol for me—*nay*, nature has! See those peeps of the sun, and that bright cloud which dyes with heaven's light the feathers of the birds flying beneath it. See how the sunbeams are laughing. I want to climb into those branches and make my throne there. Why don't you go away and let me, if you are my slaves?'

'Your Royal Highness,' they answered, in piteous tones, 'you must not—you must not! You might break one of your royal limbs—'

'No, I won't; you watch now! And Prince Sassafras darted from among them. But before his lithe body could embrace the trunk, his tutors and time-servers threw their arms about him, and besought him to be reasonable. As they formed a circle around him, his breast heaved with passion, and his eyes were filled with indignant tears.

'You mock me!' he cried. 'Who is the slave—you or I? I can't move; I am tied down! Other boys climb trees, and don't break their limbs!'

Forward came the Court Statisti-

cian, all the wrinkles in whose face formed figures of ☺, and produced a book from which he read how many boys in the kingdom of Noland climbed trees annually, how many met with accidents, and what the percentage of the one to the other was.

'Bother!' exclaimed the Prince, putting his fingers in his ears. 'I don't want to hear it—I won't hear it! I want to climb this tree.'

'The hopes of the nation are centred in you—' they pleaded.

'I don't believe it,' he exclaimed, interrupting them.

'The eyes of the world are upon you—'

'Why don't they turn their eyes away, then? What is it to them? I don't want them to stare at me so; I want to be let alone. The eyes of the world won't see me climb the tree, if you will let me.'

'We dare not allow your Royal Highness to run the risk.'

'O,' he said, with sarcastic emphasis; 'you dare not *allow* me! And I am not a slave!'

'You are our most gracious prince and master.' And they bowed and fussed about him most obsequiously.

'O, I am, am I? Well, one day you shall see'—they inclined their heads eagerly; he gave them a queer look—'Well, you shall see what you shall see!'

And the Prince laughed at their eager air, and then grew thoughtful, and returned with them to the palace.

Being endowed with the delicate cunning which is often a special attribute of sensitive young natures,

and of quiet shy women as well, he was not to be so easily thwarted as they imagined; and, pitting his wit against theirs, he proved himself more than a match for the wily old courtiers, deeply steeped as they were in world wisdom. They kept a strict watch upon him, and he knew it; and they did not know that he knew it. He bided his time patiently; and one day he was missing. They hunted for him here and there, but although they thought they were acquainted with every nook and corner in the woods and palace, they could not find him. They searched for him under the beds and in the cupboards, and up the trees and in the summer-houses, and in every place where it was possible for him to hide himself; they turned the palace inside out, to speak figuratively, and the grounds about the palace outside in; they questioned the sentries and the cooks and the gardeners; they locked up one old woman and three small boys for not giving satisfactory replies to unintelligible questions; and all to no avail. In a certain corner in a certain closet they might have found the suit of clothes the Prince had worn the day before—for he had taken the precaution to array himself in the plainest garments he could get together—but they certainly would not have found him. Where was he?

He had made his way, by devious paths, so that he might not be tracked, to a quiet hollow near the base of a flower-clad hill, in the crown of which a pretty stream had birth, the silver water-threads of which danced down the sides most

unmathematically and erratically. Once or twice he had lingered on the road, to listen to the whisper of the corn which was ripening in the fields, and to watch the bees as, with their dusky belts of burnished gold, they flew, honey-laden, to their hives, humming hymns of gladness in praise of bounteous nature. Summer's sweetest breath was here, and the wondrous colours of a myriad delicate flowers were made more beautiful by contrast with the tufts of bright green moss which dotted the course of the silver stream, and drew life from its laughing spray. Here the water-beads ran swiftly; here they stole slyly; here they flashed merrily: as if they were being pursued, and were fearful lest they should be caught; or as if they were stealing to where their lovers were sleeping; or as if, with their glistening eyes, they were speeding to the embrace of beloved companions; or as if, with their fresh lips bubbling with joyous delight, they were running to kiss the wild flowers that grew at the foot of the hill, and to breathe new life and beauty into them. In this retired spot there were no trees; but there were masses of wild forget-me-nots and other flowers as beautiful, to charm the senses of the truant Prince. Roaming about this lovely retreat—now stooping to kiss his own lips in the sparkling stream, and to taste its sweet waters; now pausing to listen to the melody of the birds; now gazing with heart-worship at the light and colour which surrounded him, and with full soul drinking in the beauty of nature's most wondrous works—the

Prince came suddenly upon a lad of about the same age as himself. Robin was this lad's name; poorly-clad was he; with a sunburnt face, and with eyes afire with light caught from nature's smiles.

'Hallo!' cried Robin.

'Hallo!' responded the Prince; and sat him down, and looked at the exquisite tints of the leaves and petals, and then looked up at the skies, and wondered whether the flowers drew their colour from the clouds. The lads fell into conversation, and the Prince, who was a cunning questioner, learned in a very short time a great deal concerning Robin.

'So your father is a woodman?' said the Prince, stretching himself lazily on the ground, and peering into a tangle of wild forget-me-nots, whose thousand blue eyes peered up into his own.

'Yes,' answered Robin; 'he cuts wood for the King.'

'Has he got a large house?'

'It ain't a house; it's a cottage. But it's large enough, and better than some. There's a garden, and plenty of beans and taters; and mother's a good un! And there's a litter of pigs.'

'Ah,' said the Prince, with a sudden and unaccountable interest in the litter of pigs, 'and what do they do?'

'They squeak, they do—except the big uns.'

'And they?'

'They grunt, they do!' And Robin laughed at his own wit.

The Prince reflected upon this information, and not finding the subject profitable, dismissed the pigs from the conversation.

'Have you got woods and grounds?'

'Yes, surely; all these.' And Robin made a comprehensive sweep with his arm, as though all the hills and woods were as good as his.

'Is your father happy?'

'There's something 'd make him happier.'

'What's that?'

'Two shillin' a week more.'

'If he had that, he'd be quite happy?'

'Ay, as happy as the day is long.'

'And you—you are not watched and surrounded and dogged by spies, are you?'

'No, indeed!' said Robin, with a stare. 'I should like to catch 'em at it!'

'And if you want to climb a tree, you can, eh?'

'I should think so! I say, did you ever go birds'-nesting?'

'No,' replied the Prince; 'is it nice?'

Robin's blithe laughter ran along the hill, and met the dancing water-beads, which rippled into the stream with it.

'Nice! There ain't nothing in the world like it. But you've got to be careful, you know, sometimes. Some places you mustn't go into; and they're the best! Some trees you mustn't climb; and they're the best! Then you've got to look about you. Such fun!'

'And go elsewhere, eh?'

'Not a bit of it,' chuckled Robin. 'Can't get such fun out of elsewhere. No; go into them places that you mustn't go into—when nobody's looking! Climb them

trees that you mustn't climb—when nobody's looking! Get them birds'-nests—when nobody's looking! And run home with them—when nobody's looking!'

And Robin rubbed his hands, and looked about him blithely, as though he were doing all these delightful things.

'And to whom do those trees belong, Robin?'

'They're in the King's ground, but the King he don't mind a bit. He ain't mean enough!'

Prince Sassafras laughed at the idea of this common boy outwitting the attendants, who were always on the watch with dogs and guns; but his laughter changed to sighs as he thought, 'O, if I might do this! If I might go birds'-nesting in one of my own trees!'

Said Robin, 'Never went birds'-nesting! Ho, ho! Did you ever hear the larks sing when they get up of a morning?'

'No,' sighed the Prince, 'I am not out of bed early enough. It must be beautiful!'

'It's just jolly, that's what it is. Did you ever go nutting?'

'No,' sighed the Prince.

'Nor blackberrying?'

'No,' sighed the Prince.

Robin stared at the Prince with a mixed feeling of pity and contempt; and the Prince, keenly alive to his own shame, hung his head. Robin gave him one more chance.

'Did you ever get up in the night and steal the pickles and the jam?'

'No,' murmured the Prince, tears of humiliation coming into his eyes.

Robin, with a disdainful shrug of his shoulders, fell to upon his work, with the evident conviction

that further conversation would be wasted upon such a creature as Prince Sassafas. He was making a basket of reeds and grasses, and was twining wild flowers about it to give it variety of colour, and the Prince, desirous of redeeming his character, suggested certain alterations in the arrangement of the flowers. He had a good eye for colour and harmony of design, and Robin condescended to profit by his suggestions. The basket being finished, Robin held it out at arm's length to admire it. The Prince asked whom it was for.

'It's for Bluebell,' replied Robin.

And, inspired by the name, he sang, 'Bluebell, Bluebell!' to many kinds of airs, sweet and rough; and whistled, 'Bluebell! Bluebell!' to the birds and the trees and the dancing stream.

'Bluebell!' echoed the Prince inquiringly.

'My little sister. Mother says she's the darlinest darling as ever drew breath, and father says she's the prettiest pretty as ever opened a pair of blue eyes. And I say, Bluebell! Bluebell!' And he sang and whistled again.

'She is the same as you are, I suppose?' said the Prince.

'What do you mean?'

'Why, her clothes, now—something like yours?'

'Something like,' was the reply.

'Hm!' said the Prince reflectively, and with no intention of giving pain. 'Bluebell can't be very well dressed, then.'

Robin, who was more familiarly known as Ragged Robin, for the reason that he was always tearing his clothes among the briars and

brambles, looked down upon his common jacket and trousers, and for a moment a shadow of discontent rested on his face; but a sunbeam saw it, darted down, caught it in its embrace, and dissolved it. The Prince saw the shadow appear and disappear; and he said aloud, but in a musing tone, as though he were speaking to himself,

'Ah, now I know what sunbeams live on.'

'On what?' inquired Robin.

'On shadows,' replied the Prince.

Robin laughed.

'Why do you laugh?' continued the Prince. 'Because sunbeams live on shadows? I saw a sunbeam just now swallow a shadow from off your very face.'

'I didn't see it,' grinned Robin.

'I daresay not,' observed the Prince philosophically; 'we often don't see what's right under our noses.'

From right under the Prince's nose Robin plucked a flower.

'Look here,' he cried; 'what is this?'

It was a small flower, with a green cup, and with its inner covering shaped like a wheel; but its petals were glowing with the loveliest dyes of the loveliest sunset. Prince Sassafas was enchanted with its rare beauty.

'What is it?' repeated Robin.

'A flower,' replied the Prince, in a helpless tone, for he knew that that was not the answer expected from him.

'Any numskull could see that,' exclaimed Robin. 'But what is its name, and what is it good for?'

'I don't know,' stammered Prince Sassafas.



'Don't know your poor relations!' (Which reproach, as botanists will know, had a deeper significance than either Sassafas or even Robin was aware of.) 'The pretty pimpernel! Why, this is the poor man's weather-glass! In the morning, when it is going to rain, it folds itself up in its green cup, and you can't see a bit of its golden colour. Don't know the pimpernel! You're a wise-acre, you are, with your shadows!'

The Prince felt the justice of

Robin's rebuke, and acknowledged the wit of the retort.

'You are wiser than I am,' he murmured.

'You're a queer one,' said Robin, perplexed by these variable moods. But, his thoughts reverting to a subject which had given him pain, he cast envious eyes upon the Prince's clothes, which, although they were the commonest the Prince could find, were grand in comparison with those of his companion. Then Robin looked down

upon his own hobnails and corduroys. 'But your clothes are fine,' he sighed.

The Prince was inspired by a whimsical idea. 'Shall we change?' he suggested.

'I don't mind,' said Ragged Robin, with sparkling eyes.

And, without more ado, the boys stripped to the skin.

'I think I'm as fine as you,' said Robin, 'without the clothes.'

'Finer,' assented the Prince, comparing himself with Robin critically. 'You are better shaped, and stronger too. I wish I had such a chest as yours.'

'And I'm as white as you are!'

'Quite as white—except your hands and face.'

'Blame the sun for that,' remarked Robin sententiously.

Then they donned each the other's clothes, and each went his way.

Prince Sassafras walked straight to the old elm-tree, and climbed it, and clapped his hands in triumph as he sat on his throne. When he clapped his hands, the birds flew out of their nests in sudden alarm, and perched themselves on far-off branches. The old birds solemnly watched him, with their heads set rakishly on one side, and he, sitting very still, watched them. Then, without moving his limbs, he began to whistle and chirrup softly; and the birds, after much listening, questioned each other in melodious notes, and, deciding that he was not an enemy, returned to their homes, and peeped at him through lacework of moss and twig. All this was very delightful to the

Prince; never in his life had he spent so pleasant a day. The earth, the air, the clouds, the tree in which he sat, were filled with marvels, and his mind became attuned to the grand works by which he was surrounded. The day grew drowsy, and the hum of insect life sounded in his ears like a hymn. Suddenly his reverie was disturbed by a great commotion below. He looked down, and beheld a number of his attendants and time-servers in anxious consultation. They were dirty and dusty, and their faces had lengthened considerably during the last few hours. Altogether they were in a sad plight.

'They have been looking for me,' said the Prince, chuckling.

As they stood debating and stretching out their fingers in all directions, one of the party who was especially obnoxious to the Prince, and who, being much heated, was wiping his bald head, suddenly shrieked very loudly, and clapped his hand to his head. The others thought he had been attacked by an idea, and they waited for him to deliver, holding out their arms and inclining their bodies, in the attitude of persons who expected to catch a prize. But something more tangible had caused his alarm. The Prince, finding a marble in the pocket of Robin's trousers, had dropped it on to the time-server's bald pate. The unfortunate attendant looked down for the cause, and then looked up to heaven, and in this way the Prince was discovered.

'Come down,' they cried wrathfully. 'Come down, you young

ruffian! How dare you sit in the Prince's tree?'

For so they had dubbed it from the day he had first tried to climb it. He had, in a measure, made it sacred in their eyes by his notice, and they had even debated the advisability of hedging it round with gilt palings, as being immeasurably superior to the other trees, and as being a kind of historical landmark.

'Go away, you old stupid!' the Prince called out in reply, making his voice very rough, so that they should not recognise it. 'Don't you see that I am enjoying myself?'

They shook their fists at him, and he shook his at them. He was prodigiously elated. The birds hopped out of their nests, and observed the disturbance. They chattered about it, and gave opinions. The younger ones, with youthful enthusiasm, would have sided with the Prince, as their sympathies were with him, but the older and wiser birds said, 'No; let us stand aside and arbitrate.'

'If you don't come down,' bawled the attendants, 'we'll put you in the stocks!'

'If I don't come down,' bawled the Prince, 'I can't for the life of me see how you will manage it.'

They gasped at him, and at each other, and one bolder than the rest commenced to climb the tree. Prince Sassafras broke wood from the branches, and threw the pieces at him so vigorously, and with such good aim, that he was glad to get safe to earth again.

'Ha! ha! ha!' laughed the Prince; and a scaly old jackdaw,

who had not laughed for ever so many years, flew out of his nest, and echoed feebly, 'Ha! ha! ha!' after the fashion of doddering old lunatics who strive to ape youth.

The attendants were more and more furious.

'Read the Riot Act!' they cried.

In accordance with that wisdom for which they were celebrated, and which provided for the fitness of all things, the time-server with the weakest voice read the Riot Act elaborately. That part of it which impressed his hearers most powerfully was contained in the word *WHERREAS*. Whenever he came to that magic word, he piped it out with a mighty effort at the top of his voice, and those who surrounded him—who had always suspected that *WHERREAS* was the fount of justice, and now were sure of it—bowed their heads worshipfully as to a talisman which contained the pith of all law. Prince Sassafras listened with profound attention until the reading was completed.

'Hear, hear,' he said, clapping his hands in applause. 'Now I will come down. The moral force that lies in *WHERREAS* has conquered me, and I'm getting very hungry.'

Down he scrambled, hand under hand, as active as a squirrel, and as though he had been accustomed to climb trees all his life. Down he plumped in the midst of his attendants, and raised such a dust that they ran a few paces away to save their eyes. He leaned his back against the tree, and looked at them jauntily. As they advanced towards him with wrath in their countenances, with the intention

of seizing him and treating him roughly mayhap, he spoke to them in his natural tones, and bade them be careful, for he was rather tired.

'It is the Prince!' they cried, in amazement.

Their manner was so comical that the Prince laughed long and blithely, and the doddering old jackdaw made such an effort to renew its youth that it shed its last feather, and almost shook itself into a fit.

'And in these clothes!' they exclaimed, as they surrounded him. 'He has been waylaid and robbed!'

The Prince held up his hobnailed boots for inspection, and then walked slowly up and down among them, to give them the opportunity of admiring the easy fit of his corduroys. There were no bounds to their indignation.

'Where is the robber?' they shouted. 'Can your Royal Highness describe his person?' They glared about in such a state of excitement, that one might have fancied they were going to lay violent hands on one another.

'It was a nut,' said the Prince.

'A nut!'

'A nut, that fell upon my head as I was walking along. It hurt me, too.'

'Surely, your Royal Highness,' said the attendant upon whose bald pate the Prince had let the marble fall, 'surely they drop about to-day. It must have been a nut that fell upon my head.' He rubbed the sore place as he spoke.

'Thank your stars it was not such a nut as mine. Listen.' And the Prince illustrated his words with

appropriate action. 'Down dropped the nut. I picked it up, and cracked it—you know how fond I am of nuts! But when the cracked shell was between my teeth, I felt that something living was inside. I spat it out quickly, and the kernel rolled from the shell, and looked at me, in the shape and likeness of a man. And as it gazed at me I became fascinated by its beauty, and it grew and grew until it was as high as my knee; and there it stopped growing. It was dressed in the brightest green and scarlet, and its eyes were rimmed with purple. It claimed a distant kinship with me, and said, indeed, that it was one of my neglected poor relations—which I could scarcely credit, so far as regards the plea of poverty, when I looked at the creature's beautiful clothing. But these things want searching into, my lords; and it saddens me to think that many of us die, and have been blind through all our lives. It told me so many wise things, and taught me so many strange lessons, that I was as one entranced. I remember no more about it except its name, which some of you may know. It was Pimpernel.'

'Pimpernel! Pimpernel!' they mused, and questioned one another, but no one had heard of such a creature. 'One of your Royal Highness's poor relations, indeed! Are *they* not all provided for? This Pimpernel is a beggar—an impostor! But we will find him. Call out the guards, and let the woods be searched.'

'Shut up the bell-shaped flowers!' shouted the Prince, mimicking them. 'Place a sentinel at every

tree, and build a fence of forget-me-nots around the forest!'

Some were actually about to see to the carrying out of these orders, when he called to them.

'Hold! I was but jesting! As you love me, do not make a fuss!'

They clustered about him at this adjuration. As they loved him! Two Grand Old Sticks, with white heads, giggled with delight, like a couple of foolish schoolgirls, at the ecstatic honour of being thus appealed to.

'Do not heed what I have said. No one is to blame but I, I give you my honour, so let no word be said. Regard this as a freak, and let it be a close secret between you and me. Do you understand? Mum! If you break my confidence,' he added, with a malicious twinkle, 'I'll cut down all your salaries when I am King. Now, then, let us pledge each other. Take the word from me. Mum!'

They stood before him with their fingers on their lips, and took the oath. Mum!

'Tis well,' said the Prince, quoting from the last original drama; 'let me rest a while.'

His back was still against the tree, and he looked about him with regret that so glorious a day was nearly at an end. Directly in front of him, but at some distance on an eminence, was the west wing of the palace, behind a fretwork of trees. The sun was setting, and massed troops of fiery shadows were invading the palace, and as they passed the windows glared out with threatening eyes.

'How beautiful!' sighed the Prince.

His attendants urged him to depart.

'We are ashamed to see your Royal Highness in such mean attire.'

'And yet I enjoy,' he said. 'Look above you at the clouds. What lovely fancies dwell in them! Here are an angel's wings, stretched forth beneficently, blessing mankind in fustian and silk. See their feathery tips, and the pale purple folds that hide the body of the glorious being. Here is a great hill, with a many-turreted castle built on its peak. The landscape opens—the hill grows smaller, the castle larger. A forest of pollards rises up beyond it, overshadows it, dissolves it. The airy trees and land melt into a lake, on the bosom of which are reflected the colours of a myriad sapphires and rubies, and the soft glow of many-tinted pearls which lie beneath. See—night is coming; the shadows creep into the lake's breast. Weeping willows rise on either bank—rise and overlap the water. They bend towards each other, from the opposite banks, with melancholy gracefulness. Is it not beautiful?'

They gazed above and around, and then at one another. They saw none of these things. Their unsympathising looks chilled the Prince.

'There go my fancies,' he said bitterly, pointing to some butterflies that were flying home. 'And here is a troop of caterpillars, creeping, O, so slowly and lazily! up the old elm. Come, let us creep to the palace, caterpillar-like!'

II.

MANY MEN GROW BLIND BY LOOKING AT THE SUN, AND NEVER SEE THE BEAUTY OF THE STARS.

THIS was but the beginning of the Prince's truant-playing. A second time he evaded his attendants and time-servers, and they did not discover him until near the close of day. Again he pledged them to secrecy, and then they were to a certain extent in his power. Then he played them a trick. He knew that they were curious to find out where he went to, and that they had laid plans to follow him.

'It really must be seen into,' they said to one another, 'for our own sakes as well as his. Youth is ever rash.'

'His Royal Highness is so cunning,' cried one.

'We must use stratagem,' said another, with his finger to his nose; 'if we can't find out by hook, we must by crook.'

But neither hook nor crook was of use to them, as it turned out. Prince Sassafras stole away one day, and knowing that they were following him, he led them a pretty dance. He played them a pretty trick, too. He came to a morass, and jumped across it. They, not aware that the ground was soft, jumped as he jumped, but not being so lithe, stuck in the middle. Then, as they were floundering in the mud in their silk stockings and dandy pumps, he turned upon them, and laughed heartily at their comical appearance. They were in a nice plight!

On the next occasion, he know-

ingly threatened to 'tell upon them, if they did not let him have his way, or if they betrayed him. 'In which case,' he said saucily, 'I should say you will be discharged for not taking better care of me! With this fear upon them, they concealed his delinquencies, groaning at the same time under the burden of the fear that they were between two stools. For, supposing that one day the Prince should fail to present himself, and supposing that any accident should happen to him while he was out of their sight, the whole country would rise against them for having betrayed their trust. Fortunately for them, however, nothing of this sort occurred.

'If you keep faith with me,' said Prince Sassafras to them, one day, when they were in a more than usually terrible pucker, 'I will keep faith with you. Always after I have enjoyed my run, you will find me under the dear old elm. Come, now; is it a bargain?'

They had no choice, according to their notions, but to enter into this compact.

'After all, you know,' he said, 'I have somewhere read that boys will be boys.'

'But your Royal Highness is a Prince,' they urged.

'And not a boy?' was his reply.

'Well, I don't understand that.' They tried to make him understand it; but they could not beat it into his obstinate head.

'Tell us, at least,' they begged, 'where your Royal Highness goes to.'

'No, I will not tell you; I go to different places, and I choose to keep their whereabouts to myself.'

He answered them very independently, for he saw that he had them in his power.

'What does your Royal Highness do when you are out of our sight?'

'Nothing wrong, I assure you. Nothing wrong, on the honour of—a Prince!'

After that, of course, there was nothing more to be said. The honour of a boy they might have doubted, but they did not dare to doubt the honour of a prince. So they were compelled to assume an appearance of content, although they were far from easy in their minds.

It was with Ragged Robin, and at Ragged Robin's home, that he spent his stolen hours. His station was not known; it was supposed that he lived in the neighbouring town; and it was plainly seen that his circumstances were better than those of Robin's parents. When he was asked his name, he hesitated a moment, and then said it was Myrtle; so as Myrtle he was known to them. He became a great favourite with them, as much because of his blithe cheery manner and handsome face as because he made them small presents occasionally. They were simple country people, happy enough in their way, and contented with their station in life. One thing certainly would have made Robin's father as happy as the day was

long, as Robin had said, and that was the two shillings a week more which Robin had spoken of. It was his only grievance, and he spoke of it invariably as if two shillings a week more would set everything in the world right that happened to be wrong. Perhaps it may be recognised that the burden of his grievance is not an uncommon one. Their home was exactly as Robin had described it—very small, very humble, and very pretty. Bluebell, a child of about eight years of age, was the prettiest and most engaging creature that Sassafras had ever seen, and deserved all the praises that Robin had bestowed upon her. She and Sassafras became great friends; and when the fond mother had sufficient confidence in Sassafras, she allowed him to take her blue-eyed darling for a ramble in the woods. He learned a great deal from these poor people, and was entirely happy in the society of his humble friends. The hours he spent with them were the brightest in his boyhood's life.

Near to their cottage lived two friends of theirs—an old woman and her son; he known as Coltsfoot, she as Dame Endive. Proud, indeed, was this old woman of her son; and she had every reason to be, for Coltsfoot was of a rare type: a grave and thoughtful man, too serious for his years in the opinion of some, but earnest, whole-souled, and with fine susceptibilities. If Ragged Robin was learned in the life of the woods, and spoke of their inhabitants as one does of familiar companions, Coltsfoot was learned in the higher life of human creatures. He had studied deeply

among them, and was wiser than he who gains knowledge from books. More than this: he did not learn by rote. The eyes of his mind were open wherever he walked; he was a just man, with a tender heart. He was a poor schoolmaster, and he worked among the poor, and was regarded by them with respect and admiration; with affection also, for he had in his studies gained some knowledge of medicine, and he administered to the sick without a fee, where to pay one would have been a hardship. Many and many a night did he sit by the bedside of a sick neighbour, and cheer body and soul by his kindly words and deeds; and when his task was done, he would put aside the offered reward with a gentle hand, and say, 'Nay, neighbour; another time, when you are better able to afford it; well knowing that that time would never come. His was the unclouded charity which springs from an unselfish compassionate nature.

Between Coltsfoot and Sassafras an intimacy sprang up, which ripened into friendship. Coltsfoot was attracted by the bright wit and lively fancy of Sassafras, and Sassafras was not long in discovering that here was a man of a higher order than those among whom he was accustomed to move.

'You know a great deal,' said Sassafras; 'and yet you are not very old.'

'I am more than thirty years of age,' replied Coltsfoot.

'How did you learn all you know?'

'I taught myself chiefly, I think,' said Coltsfoot, with a smile.

'One *can* do that, then?'

'Surely; and if you read the history of men, you will find that that kind of teaching seems to bear the best fruit.' He said this candidly, not as a boast, for he was not vain-glorious, but as the sober truth.

'Then to be born great—' mused Sassafras.

'Do you mean, to be born rich and in a high position?'

'Yes; to be born great, in that way, does not make one great?'

'Unfortunately, no.'

'Why unfortunately?' pursued Sassafras.

'Because those who are born thus have so much power for good in their hands that, if they were really great, the world would be better than it is.'

'It is not a good world, then?' sighed Sassafras.

He was young; his mind was pliable and amenable to kindly influence, his nature was susceptible and tender; not to be wondered at, therefore, that out of his regard and admiration for Coltsfoot, he was ready to accept Coltsfoot's views without question; ready, indeed, to accept them in a more exaggerated sense than Coltsfoot intended.

Coltsfoot laid his hand kindly on Sassafras's head. 'It is a good world,' he said, with somewhat of seriousness in his tone, as though he wished to impress Sassafras; 'a good world, in every sense; but there are many wrongs and injustices in it which are allowed to exist, and which might with ease be removed by those who are born to greatness.' His words sank into



Sassafras's heart. 'But in the mean time,' Coltsfoot continued, with a sweet and serious smile, 'we will go on and work, and not lose heart because things are not as we wish them to be.'

'You are never idle,' said Sassafras.

'Do you think man was born

to be idle? Have you not heard that work is God's heritage to man?'

'No.'

'It is; and the best and sweetest heritage. The idle man is like a weed in a field.'

'Then one who does not work—'

'Fulfils not his mission. The

world would benefit by his absence.

Thought SassafRAS: 'I wonder what some of my time-servers would say to this? Read the Riot Act, perhaps.'

Such conversations as these were not uncommon between SassafRAS and Coltsfoot; and they led the Prince into new fields of thought. What he saw, also, in his wanderings with Coltsfoot stirred him strangely. He had been taught to believe—not directly, not in plain words, but insidiously and by false inference—that the poor were of a different order from that of which he was the chief ornament. He expressed this to Coltsfoot, not as his own opinion, but as he heard it.

'Come with me,' said Coltsfoot.

And the Prince and the poor schoolmaster went together into the houses of the poor, and Coltsfoot showed SassafRAS the virtues and the good that were in their lives. Had the Prince been of Coltsfoot's age, Coltsfoot would probably have shown him more of their vices, so that whatever judgment he formed might have been formed upon a thoroughly correct basis; but SassafRAS was a boy, and Coltsfoot (apart from his consideration for SassafRAS's tender years) was anxious to show the best side of those he loved and compassionated. Yet he did not utterly conceal their vices; he spoke of them with gentle words of commiseration, saying how, in many instances, the poor were like creatures walking in the dark, being, in most instances, judged by a higher stand-

ard than that up to which they were educated, or were like helpless fish attracted by the glare of lights.

was while the Prince's mind was filled with the theme that he said to his time-servers,

'What do you think of the poor

They shrugged their shoulders as they were wont to do at any subject that was indifferent to them and answered carelessly,

'They are an ungrateful class.

'Why ungrateful?' questioned the Prince. 'For being allowed live?'

They evaded explanation by remarking, 'Your Royal Highness is too young to understand these matters.'

With this he was forced to be satisfied, for they would return him no other answer. In truth, they were puzzled and perplexed by his whims and whams, as they termed them; strive as they might to educate him in the right way, he refused to think as they bade him. To them it was inexplicable that he would not follow them blindly through the path of roses, but would bother his head about the nettles. This suggestion concerning the roses came from the Court Poet, and was highly praised by all but the Prince.

'You have forgotten the thorns,' he said.

'They are not for your Royal Highness,' was the answer he received.

'If weeds and thorns exist,' he remarked sagely, 'they must be minded.'

'It will be our pleasure and duty,' they said, 'to clear them from your Royal Highness's life; they

shall not touch your sacred person.'

'My sacred person!' he repeated, under his breath, and trembled at the words. To him they sounded like profanity.

Still he persisted, and was then told that it was not seemly in him to allow his mind to be thus disturbed.

'These things are not for princes,' they said.

After his usual fashion, he flew from one to another for counsel and assistance. In some rare way there had come to this young Prince an intense and earnest desire to know the rights and wrongs of things, and he found himself battling in a sea of doubt because of the conflicting views that were presented to him. He asked Coltsfoot about the 'divine right,' which he said he had heard was the especial attribute of kings; and Coltsfoot showed him, first, not only the folly but the blasphemy of the term, if taken (as it is too often taken) in its literal sense; and next, to what great ends it might be used, if rightly understood. Raising some up, and bringing some down, Coltsfoot brought all persons on a level, so far as regards the laws and principles of humanity and morality and the proper living of life. Coltsfoot saw that SassafRAS was in doubt as to his opinions, and without in the least suspecting the lad's exalted station, he opened his heart and mind to the lad whom he had learned to love. He implanted in the lad's soul the purest seeds of honour and religion, and did his best to lay the foundation for a good life.

These conversations occurred when the snow was falling, early in December, and Coltsfoot, who never missed an opportunity of enriching the lad's mind, told him wonderful things concerning the soft flakes: how that each crystal was of the most exquisite shape and form, transcending in beauty the finest and most elaborate work of man's hands; how that, as it lightly covers the earth, it keeps the soil beneath it warm, protecting it from the nipping cold which would destroy the treasures sleeping in its breast; and many other particulars which need not be set down here.

'But for the snow,' said Coltsfoot, 'we should have no primroses.'

'And until to-day,' said SassafRAS regretfully, 'I have looked upon it with a careless eye.'

'The fashion is a common one,' observed Coltsfoot; 'many men grow blind by looking at the sun, and never see the beauty of the stars.'

'Nor feel the peace that is in them,' added SassafRAS. 'I have sometimes thought, as I have gazed at them from my window on a still night, that I should like to pass away into the depths where they lie, and float among them in eternal peace.'

'The nights are not always still,' responded Coltsfoot: 'storms come and wild winds; the clouds are tossed and whirled on the wings of the wind; and if a star is visible, it hangs disconsolately and drearily in the heavens, like a soul in doubt.'

SassafRAS in a timid tone repeated a few lines of a poem he had

composed, but had never had courage to show his friend :

'I stood upon a dark and dreary shore,
And voices rose upon the viewless air,
And sighed, "Ah, nevermore shalt thou
know peace !

Evermore shalt thou be tossed on this dark
shore,

Till death shall claim thee for thy own ;
And then, thou scornful doubter, what
shall be

Thy After to mortality ?'

Coltsfoot suspected the authorship, and notwithstanding the boyishness of the effort, listened thoughtfully to the lines ; he traced in them the doubts and yearnings of a young sensitive soul, and with a peculiarly sweet smile, he said,

'You sigh for peace. Well, peace will come to all of us to-morrow.'

'To-morrow ?'

'Yes, for to-morrow all of us must die.'

'And then?' asked Sassafras, with eager yearning.

'A new birth,' replied Coltsfoot, passing his arm around Sassafras with a kind and affectionate mo-

tion. 'To be believed in as we believe in the wisdom which designed this wondrous work, the world ; to be worked for, so that we may fit ourselves for it, with faith and cheerfulness and good intent.'

Scarcely a week after this conversation, orders came to the palace that the Prince was to set forth on his travels early in the ensuing year. His tutors and time-servers were delighted. 'No more truant-playing then,' they said to one another ; for the Prince's truant holidays had grown so frequent lately as to cause them more trouble and anxiety than ever. Sassafras was not pleased at the idea of leaving his friends, but he knew that it would be vain to resist. He made up his mind that he would see them once more before he left ; but day after day passed, and he found no opportunity to escape. At length the opportunity came ; or rather he made it, and, singularly enough, on Christmas-day, which happened to fall that year on the Sabbath.

III.

DEEP IN THE EARTH LIES THE GOLD, HIDDEN IN DARKNESS ; AND
PRECIOUS STONES ARE FOUND IN ROUGHEST PLACES.

He met Coltsfoot on his way. Coltsfoot had a bundle in his hand, and a bunch of winter roses.

'I was coming to you,' said the Prince. Coltsfoot nodded and smiled. 'I would not go away without seeing you once more, and bidding you good-bye.' The Prince's lips quivered as he uttered these words.

'Good-bye!' echoed Coltsfoot.

'You are about to leave us, then ?'

'Yes. I am to be taken from

those I love best in the world ; I am to be torn from the scenes and the friends that are dearest to me. Pitiless fate ! Should I not be content here to live and die !'

'Why does not the world stand still,' said Coltsfoot, in a tone of gentle reproof, 'and why does not old Time stop the running of his sands to prolong our happy moments ? Why are we not always young ? why are the skies not always bright ? why do the flowers

wither and die ? why is it not for ever summer ?'

'I understand you,' answered the Prince. 'You think me weak for complaining. I do not ask for these impossibilities. Nature must run her course—seasons must change, flowers must die. But they will come again, and I shall not be here to welcome them. Summer's sweet breath will kiss these dear woods before many months are passed, and I shall be far away.'

'Your regrets are natural,' responded Coltsfoot, 'but you must not magnify them into wrongs. I shall miss you, dear lad, for I have grown to love you !' The Prince raised his face, now flushed with pleasure at the declaration, eagerly to the more sober face of Coltsfoot. 'Now is there not balm in Gilead ? Is there not comfort in the thought that we have fairly won love and respect, and that we hold a place in the hearts of friends whose faces we may never look upon again ?'

'Do not say that !' cried the Prince, covering his eyes with his hands. 'O, do not say that !'

'Nay, nay, nay ! Life has its duties, and we must perform them with cheerful minds. Life has its griefs, thank God ! and we must bear them with resignation. Yes, thank God that life has its sorrows. There is sweetness in them, believe me. Suffering is the mother of compassion. Hearts might be stone but for pity ; life would be harsh without charity. Think—think, dear lad ! and be grateful for everything in which there is no shame.'

'Your words strengthen me,' murmured the Prince.

'Then,' continued Coltsfoot, 'is

it in this place only that summer is to be found ? What spot is there in the world upon which the sun does not shine ? Dear lad, summer is not here or here—he lightly waved his hand to the south, to the west—'summer is here.' He placed his hand on his companion's heart. 'Ah, we are not grateful enough. We do not know how happy is our lot, in comparison with the lot of others. How often have I been shamed into humbleness by the contemplation of the lives of those who are not blessed as I am blessed ! They were walking in the woods towards a village ; the trees were lightly covered with snow, which had fallen during the night ; the air was keen and fresh and sweet. 'If a multitude of people were before me on this fair Christmas-day, I should be tempted to preach them a sermon in six words : Be humble ; be grateful ; be charitable. And should these few words bear fruit, the sermon would be long enough and good enough. You cannot remain with me much longer, I suppose, to-day ?'

'I have come to spend the day with you,' replied the Prince, 'if you will let me.'

'You may ?'

'Yes, I may, as it is the last day we shall have together for a long time. But I will come back.'

'You will come back a man. I shall be always here, I think. My way of life is marked out for me, and it lies within a small circuit.'

Thus conversing, they arrived at the village, and halted at a small cottage, which bore signs of decay. The doorway was so low that

Coltsfoot, who was a six-foot man, had to stoop his head upon entering; a little girl, who looked like a wise little woman, and yet was not more than six years of age, was sitting in a low chair, hushing a baby to sleep. The baby may have been three months old, and the nurse might have been her mother, so womanly were her ways. Another little girl, two or three years younger than the nurse, was also in the room, which was clean and very poorly furnished. A few paper pictures, cut from cheap prints, were pasted on the walls, and three violins were hanging in a corner. The children looked at Coltsfoot, and smiled a welcome, staring bashfully at Sassafras.

'Well, little ones,' said Coltsfoot, 'and how is mother this morning?'

'She is a little better,' answered the eldest girl; 'so she said.'

'That is good,' he said, rubbing his hands cheerily. 'Here are some winter roses for you.'

A thin voice from an inner room, which was the only other room in the cottage, asked who was there.

'It is I,' called Coltsfoot; 'I will come in presently and see you. Well, pet, and what have you to say?' This to the second little girl, who was climbing on to his lap. The baby was asleep by this time, and was lying in a cradle. The eldest child, being released from her burden, was arranging the flowers in a broken jug, and admiring them with eyes too sadly bright for one so young.

'We've got a pum-pudden for dinner,' said the child on Coltsfoot's lap.

'Ah, that's a fine thing,' respond-

ed Coltsfoot, kissing her, and setting her down. 'Go and shake hands with the young gentleman, and tell him your name.'

'I'm Lucerne,' she said, standing by the Prince's side, and gazing up at him.

'And baby's name is Daisy,' added Coltsfoot, 'and our little mother here is Iris.'

Iris calmly shook hands with Sassafras, and then resumed her duties.

'Our little woman,' continued Coltsfoot tenderly, 'does everything in the house, and is quite wise. She can scrub and cook and mend clothes; and she can do something cleverer than all these—she can play the fiddle.'

'And so can I,' put in Lucerne.

'And so can Lucerne,' Coltsfoot assented; 'and I shouldn't wonder, when Daisy gets to be as much of a little woman as her sisters, that she will play the fiddle also. Now I'll go and see mother.'

He went in to the sick woman, and remained with her for a few minutes, Sassafras in the mean while making friends with Iris and Lucerne. When Coltsfoot and the Prince left the house, they left sunshine behind them. On their way, Coltsfoot related the story of these poor people. It was simple enough. The father had died nine months ago, leaving his family destitute.

'That was surely wrong,' observed Sassafras.

'Undoubtedly; but you must not blame the man. He worked from morning to night, and earned the barest pittance for his brood. He had no extravagances and no vices; he was not even a beer-drinker. In this respect, he was

useless to the State, and useless to those voracious creatures who distil and brew, and whose appetites grow by what they feed on.'

Sassafras did not understand these allusions, and Coltsfoot continued:

'The breadwinner being gone, the wife was left helpless. It is a mystery to me how some poor persons manage to live. They have nothing, and can earn nothing, and yet they manage to rub on somehow. Deep in the earth lies the gold, hidden in darkness; and precious stones are found in roughest places. So among the poor and in the roughest places, there must be running veins of sweet humanity, which are never idle and never worked out. There can be no other solution to the mystery. The woman did some little work, until she was near her confinement with Daisy. Then things began to look very bad indeed, and Heaven knows how matters might have ended, but for a certain little fairy in that house whose name is Iris.'

'Iris! that child!' exclaimed the Prince. 'Why, what could she do?'

'Iris, that child, did a brave and wise thing. Her father had taught himself the violin, and she, young as she was, had learnt from him how to handle the bow. You saw her father's violins hanging on the wall; the wife had parted with nearly everything, so that the partnership between the bodies and souls of her children should not be dissolved, but with a weak womanly tenderness she clung to her dead husband's violins as though they were living creatures, determining that they should be the last things to go for

bread. In the dead of night she may have fancied she heard their strings vibrate, speaking to her of old times—they had loved each other, this man and woman—and perhaps the strings of her heart were touched responsively. Iris, one morning in the spring, took a violin from the wall, and quietly went out of the house. I saw her that morning; she was playing in a byway, where but few persons passed. "Why, Iris!" I cried. She opened her right hand, and showed me a few coppers which, even in that but little frequented place, the charitable poor had given to her as they passed. Then I understood it all; the little six-year-old maid had taken upon herself the duties of breadwinner, but was not yet bold enough to stand where many people were. That courage came soon, and she taught Lucerne to play a little; and day after day the two mites go out, and play the old tunes their father played, while their mother lies sick at home. The people have grown very fond of them, and give, out of their small store. When Daisy grows up into a woman of two years old, I have no doubt she will go forth with her sisters to fight the battle, armed with violin and bow. Already Iris gives her the fiddle to nurse, instead of a doll. And now you have the history of that humble household. Maybe you may find some heroism in it.'

They had dinner at Ragged Robin's house, Coltsfoot's mother being of the party. A happier group was never assembled beneath a roof. The fare was plain and sweet, the walls rang with merry laughter,

and the entire absence of ceremony contributed vastly to the Prince's enjoyment.

'I think,' he whispered to Coltsfoot, 'that the poor have many pleasures which the rich do not taste.'

Coltsfoot smiled; he was satisfied that his young friend was learning good lessons in a good way. The family wished Coltsfoot and Sassafras to remain with them the whole of the day; but Coltsfoot said that they had many things to see, and that they would return in the evening. In accordance with Coltsfoot's wish, Sassafras had not told them that he was about to leave them.

'Wait until to-night,' Sassafras said; 'it might spoil their pleasure to know too soon. They have but few holidays.'

'Then you really think,' asked Sassafras, 'that they will be sorry to lose me?'

'I am sure so,' replied Coltsfoot.

Sassafras found some consolation in this; it sweetened his grief. Coltsfoot took him into the City, where he witnessed many strange scenes, and where he saw the poor and helpless in their best and worst aspect. Wherever he went he met with touches of humanity which brought sweet light into the darkest places—wherever he went he saw the poor helping the poor. Coltsfoot was welcomed everywhere, even in the worst of places, for all recognised in him a friend. They walked through a nest of bad narrow thoroughfares, a very maze of shrunken diseased courts and lanes, in which it was almost impossible for virtue not to

lose its way. Sassafras was frightened at the sights and sounds which greeted him: he clung closely to Coltsfoot, who conducted him safely through these hotbeds. Swarms of children were there, learning; swarms of men and women were living the lives they had been brought up to in their childhood; doing their duty, as one bitter cynic among them said, to the best of their ability in that sphere of life in which it had pleased God to place them.

'There is nothing to fear,' said Coltsfoot; 'they will not harm us.'

'Where do all these people live?' asked Sassafras.

'In cellars,' replied Coltsfoot, 'in garrets, in rooms where heaven's light is veiled, huddled together like rats, clinging to each other for warmth like vermin. O, that I were a ruler, if only to accomplish one task!'

'What task?'

'To sweep away these nests of corruption—to purify the streets. Sewers breed rats. But these living things are human creatures, God help them! Dear lad, I have my doubts as well as you. Sometimes when I visit these places, knowing that they have existed for scores of years, knowing that they will exist for scores of years longer, knowing that thousands and thousands of helpless babes will be born here and educated to lives of infamy, I doubt whether under such circumstances man can be held responsible for crime, and I am driven against my reason to ask whether civilisation is a curse or a blessing. Only to you, dear lad, would I express these doubts, for I know the danger that lies in them.'



These words were as painful to Sassafras to hear as they were to Coltsfoot to utter, but they were prompted by indignant pity, and Coltsfoot could not restrain the utterance of them.

They emerged into the wider thoroughfares, and—in the brighter aspect of the space in which they now moved, and the brighter prospect of pleasant hours presently to be spent with Bluebell and her kindred—were striving to shake from their minds the dust of melancholy which the scenes they had witnessed had engendered, when a babel of voices and sounds of hurried steps in their rear caused them

to turn. Some twenty men and women, with alarm and pity on their faces, clustered about Coltsfoot and Sassafras, and began to speak all at once.

'I tell you he is a doctor. I tell you he isn't. He is; he isn't. Well, ask him. He's a good sort anyway, and is likely to know something about it.'

Coltsfoot held up his hand, to stop their unintelligible babble.

'I am not a doctor according to the law,' he said, 'but I have some knowledge of medicine.'

'There! there! didn't I tell you so?' exclaimed those who were right to those who were wrong.

'But what special thing is it,' continued Coltsfoot, 'that you say I am likely to know something about?'

'Death,' said a man, stepping forward. 'That special thing.'

'Explain yourself.'

'You know Death when you see it,' demanded the man somewhat surlily.

'I do,' replied Coltsfoot gravely.

'So do I; these ignorant cattle don't. "The woman's dead," said I, with half a look at her. But they wouldn't believe it. So they run after you, to prove me a liar.'

Before the man's last words were uttered, Coltsfoot, with Sassafras by his side, was retracing his steps towards the narrow courts and lanes. The mob of men and women, the numbers of which had by this time considerably increased, led the way into one of the foulest of the thoroughfares, the entrance to which was arched; the rookeries it contained were of the vilest character, and were fit only for vermin to breed in. In a garret, in one of these dens, lay a woman on the ground—a woman so thin and emaciated as to cause sighs of compassion to escape from the breast of Sassafras. Coltsfoot knelt by the side of the woman, whose only covering was a brown gown, torn, tattered, faded—fit for a dung-heap.

'She is dead,' said Coltsfoot.

The man who had first pronounced her so cast a look of triumph at the doubters.

'What was her complaint?' asked Sassafras, in a whisper to Coltsfoot; but his whisper was heard, and the question answered by the

man, who lifted the woman's bare arm, and ran his hand along the sharp bones.

'Starvation, my boy,' replied the man; 'that was her complaint. A pretty time of the year to die of that disease, eh?'

'It is true, I am afraid,' said Coltsfoot, answering Sassafras's eloquent look of pity. 'But what is this? A child?'

Truly, his eyes had lighted on a child, a baby of six months, who was asleep in a corner of the room. The baby was covered by a piece of rough sacking.

'Ah,' said a woman, 'this is Dick—little Dick.'

Coltsfoot took the child in his arms, who, for a wonder, was clean; this was clearly to be seen, for when Coltsfoot let the piece of sacking fall to the ground, the child was discovered to be perfectly naked.

'Give him to me,' said the woman, and as she relieved Coltsfoot of his burden, the baby opened his eyes, and gazed upon the group, and upon the body of his dead mother lying on the ground.

'Little Dick!' exclaimed the woman tenderly. 'Cunning little Dick! I'll take care of him to-night, sir.'

With sad hearts, Coltsfoot and Sassafras walked away from the fevered thoroughfares towards the country-landes.

'Cunning little Dick!' mused Coltsfoot. 'Poor naked little mortal! If you happen to see him when you return from your travels, what will he have grown into? But I know—alas! I know.'

He would have been filled even

with a deeper sorrow had any foreshadowing fallen upon him of another Christmas night in the years to come, when he and Sassafras and Cunning Little Dick met for the second time, in another place, and under other circumstances.

Night stole upon them as they walked.

'Come,' said Coltsfoot, with an affectionate pressure of his companion's arm, 'let us banish melancholy thought. We are in a purer air now.'

IV.

CHRISTMAS NIGHT AT THE COTTAGE.

THE heavens were full of stars, which shone brightly through the frosty air. Sounds of music fell upon their ears, and as their way lay in that direction they walked towards it.

'Can you guess who are playing?' asked Coltsfoot, with a bright smile, stepping briskly along.

A little crowd of persons stood around the players, and Sassafras, peeping through, saw Iris and Lucerne with their violins at their shoulders. The little girls bore a great resemblance to each other, but the expressions on their faces were not at all alike. The face of Iris was grave, and she drew her bow across the strings with a thoughtful and serious air; her little body moved slowly and soberly in response to the music. Lucerne's face, on the other hand, was full of smiles and sparkles; her eyes, her feet, her body danced to the music, and she swayed this way and that with graceful joyous motion.

'You see,' said Coltsfoot, in explanation, 'Iris has the cares of a family upon her; responsibility makes her serious and grave.'

The air being finished, the children stood in quiet expectation of reward. They were not

disappointed; a good many gave, the gifts being very small. One woman, putting a halfpenny into her baby's hand, caused the little one to bend over to Iris, and directed the gift; and when Iris kissed the baby, the woman herself stooped down to the tiny bread-winners, and kissed them in her motherly way.

'A better scene than the last,' said Coltsfoot.

He did not make himself known to the children, but he and Sassafras followed them quietly out of the street. When they reached a retired spot, Iris paused, and tucking her violin under her arm, proceeded with a business air to count their gains. She nodded and nodded again with satisfaction, and then the two children, with their arms round each other's necks, walked home singing softly.

'I should like to say good-bye to them,' said Sassafras wistfully; 'I may never see them again.'

'Don't say good-bye,' replied Coltsfoot, 'it makes children sad. Wish them a merry Christmas instead. Besides, we shall see them again. They are coming to the cottage to-night.'

Sassafras ran after the children,

and embraced them, and when he went away left good wishes behind him, and something more tangible, which he slipped unobserved into Iris's pocket. As he and Coltsfoot entered the lane in which Ragged Robin and Bluebell lived, sounds of merriment floated towards them. Ragged Robin's loud laugh could be plainly heard, and when they were closer to the house, Bluebell's sweeter voice greeted them. She was singing a simple song of the season, and Sassafras and Coltsfoot listened outside until the last line was sung, and then clapped their hands in applause, and cried, 'Bravo! Bravo!' All the family rushed to the door, and also some neighbours who had been invited. 'Here they are—here they are!' they shouted; and they had a scramble and a race along the narrow lane after Coltsfoot and Sassafras, who pretended that they wanted to run away. The wrens, in their warm nests in the chimneys, must have been astonished at the noise which awoke them, and as they raised their heads lazily from their beds of brown moss must have looked at each other with an air of 'What's all this about?' The Christmas party returned to the house in a merry cluster, filling the air with their laughter. Some of the older wrens, who were well acquainted with them, doubtless thought to themselves, 'Ah, that's Ragged Robin's Ho! ho! ho! harsh, and wild, and unruly; and that's his father's creak, like a door with rusty hinges; and that's his mother's cackle, He! he! he! and that is Bluebell's tender voice—her laugh

is like music—let us listen a little longer to it; and that's Coltsfoot's Ha! ha! ha!—why, he laughs like a boy to-night; and that's Sassafras's voice, low and soft. What makes it so sad and pensive? He is generally very merry. Ah, if they knew what we know, they wouldn't make so free with him!' For these discreet old wrens had friends and relations living in the warm chimneys of the King's palace, and were in the habit of visiting them very often—being but flighty creatures, as you may guess; and there they had seen Myrtle in his proper form of Prince Sassafras, and consequently knew of the deception he was practising upon Robin, and Coltsfoot, and Bluebell, and the rest. They chattered about it among themselves. 'What does he do it for? they asked of one another, without being able to furnish a sufficient explanation. 'It is perfectly inexplicable,' said one old wren, who had been born in the royal chimneys—indeed, in the very chimney of the bedroom where Sassafras slept—and whose courtly airs were a sight to behold; *she* never came to dinner with her feathers ruffled! 'It is perfectly inexplicable! I can't make it out. A Prince, who is in the enjoyment of every luxury, and who has his drawers filled with silks and laces and furs, to associate on terms of familiarity with such common persons as Ragged Robin and his family! With Ragged Robin, who hasn't a second pair of breeches to—' 'Hush! hush!' interrupted a staid old wren who looked after the proprieties. 'To his common legs,' continued the court wren, in a stately way; 'and with a per-

son like that Coltsfoot, who teaches *abc* to a lot of dirty ragged brats, and gives medicine and trash to a parcel of old women! Our Prince to associate with such-like! I don't know what we're coming to!' But an equally outspoken old wren, who had been born in the cottage chimney and who had lived a happy life there, resented this with spirit. 'And pray, madam,' she cried to the court wren, 'who are you that you should think the Prince degrades himself by coming to us for a few hours now and then? And who are you that you should try to take away the character of honest Robin and our good Coltsfoot? Let me tell you that the Prince is never so happy as when he is with us; I have heard him say so as we were taking away our dinner which he spread on the sill for us.' The court wren cocked her head disdainfully, and looked straight before her into vacancy, as though there were no such bird in existence as the cottage wren. But the cottage wren was not to be put down in this way. 'You!' she continued, 'with your stuck-up ways and your grand airs! Who are you, I should like to know! Because you happen to be hatched in a royal chimney, you think yourself of more consequence than your betters!' In short, they had a desperate quarrel, which was not confined to themselves. All the other birds joined in, and such a chattering and a whistling were heard in the royal chimneys, that it was a mercy something dreadful did not occur to the walls. The upshot of it was that a breach occurred in their friendship, and for

eight whole days the cottage wrens and the court wrens were not on speaking terms. It must be confessed that when the quarrel was patched up, it was the cottage wrens who had to eat humble pie; they could not resist the only opportunity they had of hearing the delicious bits of fashionable scandal which the court wrens always had on the tips of their tongues.

Well, these cottage wrens heard Ragged Robin and the rest making merry on this Christmas night, and made their remarks on what was going on. But they did not see everything. The best room in the cottage was lighted up by means of wooden hoops, which were suspended flat from the ceiling, and around the rims of which were stuck Christmas candles of all colours. There were holly and mistletoe on the walls, and on the mantelpiece, and over the door, and in the passages, and hanging everywhere from the ceiling, so that there were plenty of opportunities. How many kisses were given it would be impossible to say, for nobody stood on ceremony, and least of all Bluebell, who was fond of being kissed. So the night passed merrily until it was time for Sassafras to leave, and 'good-bye' had not been said. Coltsfoot saw that Sassafras could not say the word before strangers.

'Let us walk together down the lane,' he said. 'Come, Bluebell, take Myrtle's hand; come along, Robin; we four will be enough.'

He whispered to Sassafras that he would tell the mother and father. They walked down the lane, and at the foot of it Sassafras bade

good-bye—to Ragged Robin first, who, when he understood that he was about to lose his friend, fairly blubbered, and ran off to hide his grief.

'Going away!' exclaimed Bluebell. 'Where to?'

It was a difficult matter to make the little maid understand why it was imperative that Sassafras should go away to foreign countries; she thought one country was enough to live in, she said. But the word had to be spoken, despite her ignorance of necessary things.

'I will never forget you, Bluebell,' said Sassafras, 'and I want you to think a little of me when I am away, and to love me a little.'

'I'll love you always—always,' said the little maid, her tears flowing freely, for these young tender hearts are easily touched, and suffer more than we are aware, 'and I'll think of you day and night.'

'Here is a little present for you that I want you to wear, so that you can't forget me if you try to.'

He produced a very thin and slender gold chain, of trifling value,

at the end of which a small gold heart was attached. He placed the chain round her neck, and kissed her; the picture of her pretty child's face raised to his, with the tears swimming in her eyes, and her soft red lips asking for another kiss, recurred to him many and many a time during the years of his travels, and he loved to linger on the memory. The stars were glittering above and around them, and in his memory he never saw Bluebell's face with the daylight shining on it, but always in a framework of stars on such a soft, clear, tender night as this was.

'And now, dear lad,' said Coltsfoot, with a strong firm grasp of the Prince's hand, 'good-bye, and God bless you!'

'Good-bye,' sobbed Sassafras; 'I never shall forget what you have shown me this day.'

Returned to go, and lingered still, and a few more words were spoken. Then Coltsfoot, with a pain at his heart, left him swiftly and abruptly, and an important chapter in the Prince's life came to an end.

V.

LIKE WHITE FINGERS BECKONING THE DEAD.

WHERE he travelled, and what he saw, there is no room here to describe. When the first pangs of grief were assuaged, he enjoyed with keen pleasure the new scenes through which he passed. New countries, new customs, new communities, passed before him, as it were, and he kept his eyes open. But it was rarely that a prince travelled as he travelled, with such

modesty and unostentation. His chief pleasure was to wander from one place to another in an unpretending way, unknown and unobserved, but not unobserving. He was not outwardly demonstrative, and his time-servers said among themselves that they were afraid his travels were not doing him any good. They told stories of the travels of other princes and royal

personages whose course was marked by the most magnificent display. This town was one blaze of light when a certain prince entered it by night; the houses of that town were festooned with flowers, which hung from every roof and garlanded the thoroughfares. Here a wonderful entertainment was given in honour of Prince So-and-so, whom the inhabitants had never seen before and never would see again, and for whom they did not care a jot; there all the inhabitants had journeyed out of the town to meet Prince So-and-so, and meeting him when he was within four miles of the gates, ran before his carriage all the way, filling the air with huzzas, and behaving as frantically as they could have behaved if the greatest and most precious blessings which Heaven could bestow had fallen upon them. How different it was with Prince Sassafras! His most earnest desire was to be allowed to ramble quietly through the strange countries in which he was travelling, and to avoid public display. Often in his wanderings and musings did he see two tiny mites of children playing the violin in the streets of No-land, one with a grave and thoughtful face, the other with a face flushed with delight; often did he conjure up a picture of the woods round about his palace in No-land, and see himself and Coltsfoot walking slowly through them, as they had done on that memorable Christmas-day, when the beautiful white snow rimmed every leaf and branch with pure and glistening lines; often and often did he see a sweet little face raised to his, set in a framework of bright

stars, which were scarcely brighter than the tears that shone in the large blue eyes. He fed upon these memories as he grew to manhood; and months and years passed. The seasons marched royally onwards; the primroses rose from their beds; the violets opened their eyes and peeped through the hedges, making the air fragrant; the buds laughed into blossoms; the hills were crowned with flowers; the golden corn grew gray as the waves of the wind passed over it; the vines were heavy; the leaves grew old and died; the soft snow fell and filled the churchyards with white phantoms; the icicles made the valleys radiant with wondrous beauty. Until one day a courier, with his hair wildly blowing about his face, rode into the midst of the nobles of the suite and cried,

'The King of No-land is dead!'

When they recovered their breath, they hastened to the Prince, and found him lying idly by the side of a laughing brook, to which he was whispering soft and tender words. They approached him humbly and reverently.

'Your Gracious Majesty,' they said, and knelt on one knee before him.

He started to his feet and gazed at them with wild eyes. He comprehended the meaning of their attitude, and he trembled with fear and awe.

'My father——' and he faltered.

They hung their heads, and one or two contrived to squeeze a tear—Heaven only knows how they managed it—which they allowed to hang upon their eyelashes, so that their new King might see and remember.

But he saw nothing real; he stood alone in the midst of tumultuous clouds. He was not even aware that he had waved his attendants away, and that they had obeyed him. His father was dead! He could not recall one tender word or look which had ever been bestowed upon him by the dead King, whose state and duties now devolved on himself. Not one. Love between them had been a dead letter. He had often watched the children of peasants playing with their fathers; he had often seen common men carrying their children on their shoulders; he had heard words from mother's lips which had thrilled him with tumultuous pain; he had listened to childish prattle which had brought a strange yearning to his heart; he had peeped into cottage windows and seen happy family groups there, and had heard them singing and laughing together. Such a joy he had never tasted. The image of his father as he saw it was the image of a man so gross and fat that he almost groaned as he made a step towards his carriage; a man magnificently dressed, with dozens of glittering orders upon his breast. Orders bestowed upon him because of his deeds in war, of his achievements in art, of his efforts in the cause of humanity? No; bestowed upon him because he was a king, and which would well have graced him had he been worthy of his high position. A man with purple face and hanging cheeks, who drank of the best, who ate of the best, and whose life was one of splendid misery—truly, a man to be sincerely pitied, and

more to be pitied because of the splendid opportunities which were his, and which had been so miserably wasted. But this picture faded from the mind of Sassafras, and raising in its stead an ideal image of his father, he sank to the ground, and shed tears for his loss.

Early the next day he and his retinue turned their faces towards No-land, and when they reached it they found the nation in deep mourning for the bereavement it had sustained. Sassafras felt a strange thrill as he set foot once more upon his native land. He had left it a boy; he returned to it a man. Whether his heart was changed you will see for yourself as you proceed. But that it was stirred to tender emotion as he trod the steps of the palace in which his boyhood had been passed may at once be stated. It was evening when he arrived, and saying that he wished to be alone for the night, he left his courtiers abruptly, and strolled out by himself, wrapped in a cloak which concealed him from head to foot. Into the woods filled with sweet memories he strolled, and paused before the old elm-tree which he had climbed for the first time many a year ago. How well he remembered all the incidents of that day: his meeting with Ragged Robin, the changing of their clothes, the delicious minutes he had spent while sitting in the branches—there they were above him now, but he could hardly fancy what had been so clear to him then, the folding arms waiting to receive him, and the fantastic S, the initial of his name! He saw, however, the tutors and time-servers standing



beneath the tree, while he, dressed in Robin's ragged clothes, sat in the branches above them; he heard the loud cry of the old courtier as the marble dropped upon his bald pate; he heard the Riot Act read, with its mighty *Whereas*; and then in memory he scrambled down the tree, and told again

the story of Pimpernel. Although it was winter, and a soft snow was falling, he did not feel cold. He made his way slowly to the stream, so bright and beautiful in the summer with its flowery and mossy banks, so white and solemn now; then he walked in tender thoughtful mood towards the vil-

lage where Coltsfoot lived. He did not intend to make himself known; he wished, for the present, only to look on the cottage where Bluebell and Ragged Robin lived, and, if possible, to catch a glimpse of the faces of those dear friends. He had to pass a churchyard on his way, and as he approached this place he heard music in the air. It was night now, and he walked along, satisfied that if he were seen he would not be recognised. The sounds of music grew louder as he approached closer to the churchyard, and when he was quite up to it he was surprised to find that the persons who were playing were playing in that solemn place. It must be so, for there were no lights in the windows of the quaint old church which overlooked the graves. Sassafras peered into the churchyard to discover the players, but he could not at first distinguish them from the tombstones. All those tombstones were covered with soft snow, and some stood firm and straight, like soldiers on the watch, and some were bent and decrepit, like old, old men whose time had come. Three or four trees were in the churchyard, and their bare and naked branches were like white fingers beckoning the dead. One tree, which was branchless, and whose top was slightly bowed to earth, looked like a giant ghost in a white shroud. And round about them all, and among the trees and tombstones, floated the strains of the music, lingering tenderly here and there, and gliding softly away like spirits. Sassafras stepped quietly into the churchyard, and the music came

to meet him, and conducted him to the spot where the players stood. There were three of them, all girls, and they were standing round a newly-made grave. A singular sensation of faintness came upon him as he recognised the children Iris, Lucerne, and Daisy, and as he remembered that Coltsfoot was their best friend. Could it be *his* grave that they were standing by? Daisy, the youngest, was the image of Iris, as he saw her last on Christmas-day, and Iris herself, a little woman twelve years of age now, drew her bow across the strings with the same old grave thoughtful air. They did not know a stranger was near them until their melody was finished. Then, seeing a tall shadow close by, they started in alarm, and Iris, with a rapid motion, drew Daisy to her side.

'Do not be frightened,' said Sassafras, disguising his voice; 'I am a friend. I heard music as I passed, and I came closer to listen. Your name is Iris.'

'Yes, sir.'

'And you are Lucerne.'
Lucerne curtsied.

'And this is little Daisy.'

Daisy looked up at the tall shadow without fear; his kind voice had reassured them. Sassafras held out a piece of money to them, but Iris shrank back, and refused the gift. He understood at once that they were engaged in a labour of love, and he put the money into his pocket again. Then he remembered that when he last saw them their mother was ill.

'Your mother is well and strong, I hope,' he said. He was speak-

ing to friends of yesterday; it did not seem to him that years had passed.

'Mother is there,' said Iris, pointing to the grave; 'we are playing to her. She likes to hear us.' Iris said this quite seriously.

The tears came into Sassafras's eyes; this tribute of love for the dead touched him deeply.

'Was this the last air you intended to play?' he asked.

'No, sir; mother's favourite tune is to come.'

'Shall I disturb you if I remain? If I do, say so, and I will go away.'

In answer, Iris tapped gently on her violin with her bow, and the other little ones fell into position immediately. They played for half an hour, Sassafras standing quietly by; and then, as they walked side by side softly out of the churchyard, he inquired after his friends. He found that there had been other deaths during his absence. Bluebell's father and mother were both gone, and she, Robin, Coltsfoot, and his old mother all lived together now in one cottage. 'We go there often,' said Iris; 'they were very good to poor mother, who was bedridden for years, and they are very good to us. We all love them dearly, don't we, Lucerne—don't we, Daisy?'

'Yes, yes,' they answered with eager affection.

'Coltsfoot used to come,' continued Iris, 'and sit with mother regularly, and Bluebell came often too, and made nice things for us. Lucerne and I know how to read and write; Coltsfoot taught us, and he is teaching Daisy now. He will never take anything from

us. Before mother died, she kissed him more than once, and told us he was the best man that ever drew breath. Didn't she say those very words, Lucerne? The best man that ever drew breath. And he is. Then mother asked us to come and play by her grave sometimes, and told us to keep good, and be kind to one another.'

To these and other outpourings Sassafras listened with a full heart, and when he was about to leave them he asked whether they would let him give them a kiss. They held up their faces readily, and he kissed them tenderly, and wished them Good-night. 'Good-night, Good-night,' they said. But he had not gone a dozen yards, when a thought occurred to him, and he turned back. Hearing his steps, they stopped and said, 'Here is the gentleman again.'

'Some one told me,' he said, 'that Bluebell has a gold chain. Is it true?'

'O, yes,' replied Iris; 'such a beautiful one! And she wears it regularly every Sunday. And there's a little gold heart at the end of it. I know, because she has shown me.'

'That's right,' said Sassafras, in a glad tone; 'good-night, children, good-night.'

But, unseen by them, he followed them to their humble home, taking upon himself the office of protector to these little ones. Even when they were safely housed, he did not depart, but lingered long about the place, thinking of them with tenderness; and an hour afterwards, when the two younger children were abed and asleep, he peeped

through a chink in the shutters, impelled to do so by the sound of musical chords which came from within the cottage. There he saw Iris, partly undressed, tuning her

violin softly, and with a beautifully pensive expression on her face.

'God bless you, little one!' he murmured, and walked home to his palace with a happy heart.

VI.

TO GRASP THE JEWELLED HAND OF POVERTY.

SASSAFRAS was king, and the loyal subjects of No-land threw up their caps. Things went on as usual, and notwithstanding the difference in the character of the ruler who ruled yesterday and the ruler who ruled to-day, everything to-day was the same as it was yesterday. Thousands of men were butchered in cold blood in the name of civilisation, fortunes were won and lost, swindlers made millions by lies and trickery, and strove to earn popularity by spending a little of their stolen money in a public way, and persons earned and lost salvation according to circumstances.

Sassafras was king. Everybody bowed and bent before him. His nobles listened with fervour to every breath he drew. Every beat of his pulse, every look, every motion, was indexed. When he went to bed and when he rose—when he yawned and when he sighed—how much he ate and how much he drank—when he sneezed and when he blew his royal nose—every word he spoke and its inflection—every twinge, every grimace, every start, every smile—were recorded in the royal books by zealous servants for the enlightenment of future generations.

'Dear, dear!' he often exclaimed, 'why don't you let me alone?'

A pimple on his nose, a whitlow on his finger, a corn that troubled him a little, were national calamities. Everybody talked of him, morning, noon, and night, and his ears were continually burning. He was public property, and no rest was given him. If he showed only the tip of his nose in the open air, he was run after, and pointed at, and cheered and cheered again and again.

'Dear, dear!' he cried, with his fingers in his ears, 'what a noise! Is this the normal state of things in the public thoroughfares? Are my subjects always screaming thus?'

And as he rode along he bowed, as he had been taught, this way and that, this way and that, this way and that, until cricks came in his back, and he felt like a miserable dervish who had condemned himself to bend and bow until the last breath was out of him. He was compelled also to smile for such a length of time together that he felt as if his features were waxed into grin-curves, and as if he should never be able to get the wrinkles out of his eyelids again. All this was very annoying and distasteful to him. According to all human calculation, he ought to have been the happiest of the happy. It is but

an additional proof of the perverseness of human nature—although, to be sure, not one more is needed—that he was as discontented a mortal as could be found in his own kingdom of No-land.

He had wit, intelligence, imagination, a good heart, and large sympathies. But he had no time to give practical shape to his best impulses. The duties of his position were so numerous and exacting that he had scarcely a moment he could call his own, unless he stole it, and then he was told that everything went wrong and was turned topsy-turvy.

'I am the pivot then, my Lord Crabtree,' he said, 'upon which everything turns?'

'Upon which everything turns, your most gracious Majesty,' gravely assented Lord Crabtree. 'You are the sun of the nation, the source of all light, honour, and happiness.'

King Sassafras made a movement of impatience. He had just breakfasted, and Lord Crabtree, who held the post of Principal and Confidential Worryer, was attending on his royal master.

'My Lord Crabtree, it is a lovely morning.'

'Your Majesty, it is king's weather.'

'Even the weather, then, waits upon me.'

Lord Crabtree moved his hands, expressing, 'Who can doubt it?'

King Sassafras laughed lightly. 'King's weather! Nonsense! It is everybody's weather.'

'It is well known, your most gracious Majesty, upon all important occasions, that—'

'That-that-that-that, and there's an end to it. Don't prose. I should like to take a walk, and pay my respects to Nature—unattended, my Lord Crabtree, unattended. I can speak to her more appropriately when I am alone. I have been woefully neglectful of the good mother, but she will smile upon me, I have no doubt.'

'Your Majesty, it is impossible.'

'Impossible, my lord! I am speaking of a lady.'

'Your Majesty, the lady must wait.'

'My Lord Crabtree, you are insufferably rude.'

'What your most gracious Majesty says cannot be disputed. But your Majesty has forgotten. In one hour from this you have to lay the foundation stone of the great institution for the perpetuation of pauperism. The ceremony is most important; it will be a gay sight. The people are eager to see their monarch; all the bigwigs will be present; eight thousand flags will wave a welcome; two thousand and five hundred charity children will sing the national anthem—'

'In the blessed hope that they may one day find a shelter within the walls which we commence to raise this day. Good.'

'The golden trowel is ready; I have seen it, your Majesty. It is inlaid with jewels of the first water.'

'How appropriate to the purpose to which it is to be applied! To grasp the jewelled hand of poverty— Well, as you say, my Lord Crabtree, the lady must wait. But I can visit her in the afternoon.'

'Pardon me, your Majesty. This afternoon you have to preside at a meeting of the Oldfogyarians, to hear the record of the precious discovery made by the Royal Snufftakers concerning the exact date on which the death of King Musty took place.'

'King Musty, who reigned in some out-of-the-way place more than three thousand years ago! And the Royal Snufftakers have been thirty years fixing the date! Drawing salaries all the time, and causing snuff to rise in the market. Precious discovery indeed! Worthy of my reign! My Lord Crabtree, answer me a question.'

'I am all ears, your most gracious Majesty.'

'You are not complimentary to yourself, my lord. Do you think that these thirty years of labour on the part of the Royal Snufftakers have been profitably spent? Now do you? Or do you think, as I do, that both the time and money might have been better applied?'

Lord Crabtree fussed and fidgeted, but could not find words to shape a fitting reply. He made an attempt to evade the subject.

'Your most gracious Majesty, it is time to dress for the foundation stone.'

'But answer me, my lord. I will put it another way. Is not the well-being of those who live to-day of more importance than those who lived three thousand years ago?'

Still Lord Crabtree could not reply. He saw that the King was in one of his strange humours, and he was fearful of aggravating it.

'Nay, but my Lord Crabtree, I will be answered in some way, or

if you cannot answer, I will make you understand. Come to this window. What do you see?'

'Your most gracious Majesty's private garden.'

'How does it look? Is it fair to the eye, is it pleasant to every sense?'

'Your Majesty, it is a most delightful prospect.'

'There are flowers there of every kind, you see. It requires no great stretch of the imagination, my Lord Crabtree, to imagine that garden a kingdom——'

'It is a kingdom, your Majesty,' said Lord Crabtree, thinking that an exhibition of enthusiasm would please his royal master; 'a kingdom of beauty!'

'You are right. It is a kingdom of beauty, and although there are numbers of the commonest flowers in it, the eye dwells with pleasure on them. It is as you see, my lord, peopled with grandees and commoners. All classes are represented. The dainty maiden and the flaunting madam, the prince and the peasant are there. Some are decked out in the most gorgeous colours, some have but two or three modest tints. How sweet those lilacs are! How refreshing those humble wallflowers! There is modesty, there is pride, there is humility, there is arrogance. But, observe: modesty thrives, and is beautiful; humbleness is not humiliated. Nothing is trodden down, or crushed into deformity; room and opportunity are given to them to grow up in health and strength, and they all lift their heads after their various temperaments, and enjoy the blessings of

life. They are Nature's children, and Nature smiles on all alike.' Not so very long ago, my Lord Crabtree, this that we see before us was waste land; now it is civilised, and the living creatures of all grades and degrees with which it is peopled are bright and happy. What makes them so, my lord?'

Lord Crabtree pondered deeply, and cocked his left eye towards the darkest corner of the royal ceiling; but intelligence did not dawn upon him from that quarter, and he was compelled to say,

'I do not know, your Majesty.'

'I will tell you. By the mercy of the good God that reigns over all—the King bowed his head reverently—it is the gardeners who make this kingdom fair to the eye, and pleasant to every sense. It is they who see that nothing is trodden down, and crushed into deformity; it is they who see that room and good opportunity are given to all. They attend to their kingdom regularly, devotedly, and wisely every morning and evening. And observe—it is the weakest flowers that receive the greatest care and tenderness. Under that care, they grow strong; they thrive, and their lives are pleasant to themselves and to those around them. That garden represents the Present; and the gardeners—— Well, if you have any understanding of my parable, you need not me to

tell you whom the gardener should represent.'

Lord Crabtree, with owlish wisdom, blinked his eyes, and nodded his head; but having no comprehension of his royal master's meaning, discreetly spoke not a word. Presently King Sassafras resumed.

'The meeting of the Oldfogyarians will be over at six o'clock, will it not, my Lord Crabtree?'

'At about that hour, your Majesty.'

'The evening will be pleasant. I will visit my lady then.'

'Has your most gracious Majesty forgotten that you have a State dinner this evening?'

'Truly,' sighed the King, 'I had forgotten.' And murmured, 'No rest; no peace! What are these papers?'

'This is the speech which your Majesty will read after laying the foundation stone for the institution for the perpetuation of pauperism. This is the speech which your Majesty will read at the meeting of the Oldfogyarians when the vote of thanks is passed to your Majesty for presiding.'

'I see,' observed the King, glancing over the papers, 'that in both cases I speak from my heart.'

'Very much so, your Majesty.'

King Sassafras made a sour face as if he were swallowing physic, and retired to his private apartment to prepare himself for the ceremonies.

VII.

THE THREE SMALL FIDDLERS, IRIS, LUCERNE, AND DAISY.

BUT, chafing as he did most bitterly at the bondage in which he

was held, he contrived to steal a few hours of privacy now and then.

In a retired part of the grounds around the Palace he ordered a pretty lodge to be built; it was small, and was comfortably fitted up; locks of an ingenious and peculiar fashion were made, and as no one possessed a key but himself, no other person could enter the retreat. He caused it to be distinctly understood that when he went to the lodge he was not, under any pretence whatever, to be disturbed, and so absolute and determined was he in this respect that those about him were compelled to obey his command. 'Let me but discover,' he said, with stern emphasis, 'that I am watched or observed, and I will take proper means to punish the spy.' They knew, from his tone, that he was not to be trifled with. There were two entrances to the lodge, one in front, one at the back. The trees in front of the building were somewhat thinly scattered, but those at the back were close and thick. From a distance the King could be seen entering the lodge by the front entrance, but no person, unless he were set especially to watch, could see him emerge from it by the back door, which he generally did a few minutes after entering the lodge. Here, having provided himself with suitable clothes, he transformed himself from a king into a very common person, and in this disguise he went wherever his fancy took him. It took him, soon after he was crowned, to the school which Coltsfoot kept in the village. A hundred boys and girls were busily employed in producing that strange babel of sound, without which common children can-

not learn to spell r-a-t rat, c-a-t cat, and so on, when Sassafras presented himself at the door. The sunlight was streaming across the desk by which Coltsfoot sat, serious and thoughtful as usual. He started up when he saw Sassafras, and ran towards him with eager gladness.

'Welcome! Welcome!' he cried. 'How you have grown! Now you will have plenty to tell me. Are you going to stay at home? Are your travels over?'

'Yes,' answered Sassafras, as they stood with their hands upon each other's shoulders, gazing affectionately into each other's eyes; 'and I will see you as often as I can.'

Thus the old intercourse was renewed, and the old friendship, which had never been broken, came into active play again. Sassafras had taken the precaution to have his clothes made of such material as ordinary people use, and he managed cleverly enough to thoroughly preserve his incognito. How he spent his stolen hours, which were not many, need not here be set down in detail. He went about with Coltsfoot, and learnt many things, of which he would have been entirely ignorant had he confined himself to the routine of duties and pleasures which belonged to his kingly office. He renewed his acquaintance with Ragged Robin, who was a woodman now, as his father was before him, with Coltsfoot's mother, Dame Endive, and with Bluebell, who had grown into a beautiful girl, bright, joyous, happy, and as innocent as a bird. Ragged Robin had become more than ever learned in the life of the woods; he could



shut his eyes, and show you more marvels than you had ever dreamt of. With his father's axe he had inherited his father's grievance—the sigh for two shillings a week more. Now, to speak the truth, and to state the case exactly as it stood, Robin really was receiving precisely two shillings a week more than his father had received; but this did not matter—it was two shillings a week more than he wanted. Will this grievance, which has a general application, ever be remedied, and will the world ever be set right in this respect? With

the three small fiddles, Iris, Lucerne, and Daisy, Sassafras contracted a great friendship; they did not recognise him as the person who had addressed them in the churchyard, for he had disguised his voice on that occasion, and he was covered with his large cloak from head to foot. When they saw him coming they would run to the door, and Daisy would leap into his arms, and Lucerne would take tight hold of the hem of his coat, and wouldn't let go, and Iris would welcome him in her quieter fashion. These three little

maidens were deeply in love with him, and it was arranged that when Daisy and Lucerne grew up he should marry them both, and set the laws of No-land at defiance. If I were to tell you that in his lodge the King of No-land kept private stores of sweetmeats, with which he would cram his pockets when he went to see these three small children, whose boots were patched, and whose socks and stockings were darned and darned until they had lost all likeness of their original selves, you would scarcely believe it perhaps; but it is true, nevertheless, and true, also, that some of the very pleasantest hours in his life were passed in the society of these humble little maidens, who, at his bidding, would stand before him and play their sweetest melodies. It was a scene worth witnessing, and had it become known that Sassafras, King of No-land, could be seen on certain occasions sitting on a stool in the kitchen listening to the fiddling of these poor children, a large number of persons would doubtless have assembled outside the house.

Just about that time, the newspapers of No-land were filled with accounts of the approaching visit of a barbarian king, who reigned over an insignificant number of persons in a far-distant land. This king, who had never been out of his own country, and who had the miserable presumption to call himself the King of Kings, as though he were JEHOVAH, was an arrogant, proud, and tyrannical ruler, in whose presence his subjects trembled as they would have trembled before the might and ma-

jesty of God. He held their lives literally in the palm of his hand, and his nod was sufficient to cause a thousand heads to be struck off. He had nothing to recommend him; he was sullen, narrow-minded, insolent, and indescribably dirty in his habits. Nevertheless, it was deemed necessary for State reasons to receive and entertain him, as though in his person were to be found the embodiment of all the virtues and the personification of all those great qualities by which mankind is ennobled. Therefore, this miserable King of Kings was received and worshipped as though he were truly a God, and if his pride and arrogance needed strengthening, he could not have come to a better place. Guns thundered, music played, soldiers marched, flags waved, and the streets were crowded in his honour, and as the barbarian was drawn in a stately carriage here and there to grand entertainments, heralded by trumpets, surrounded by obsequious magnificence, his handsome tawny face, if it can be said to have had any expression, bore on it an expression which said, 'It is well; all this flattery, all this bending and bowing, all this grovelling and fawning, prove to me, if I needed proof, that I, the ignorant barbarian, am something more than human, and that you are as dirt beneath my feet. There are in me divine attributes which you might search for in vain among the hordes of common people who assemble to do me honour.' He wore a hat which blazed with costly diamonds and other jewels, such as had never before been seen within so small a

compass, and those men and women in No-land who led the fashion and constituted 'society' gazed with awe and worship upon the glittering mass, and many among them would have been glad of the opportunity to fall down and kiss

the dirty feet of him who wore them. Not in the most solemn moments, nor on the most sacred occasions of their lives, never in their homes nor in their churches, had their minds been filled with such worshipping adoration.

VIII.

NO EXAMPLE OF MINE SHALL EVER WEAKEN OR DEGRADE IN MY PEOPLE'S EYES THE SANCTITY OF THE MARRIAGE BOND!

THE nation was in a state of extreme dejection. King Sassafras was indisposed, and an important ceremonial had to be postponed to a future day. Bulletins were flying all over No-land, and a hundred editors were writing leading articles upon the subject of the King's illness. Fresh editions of all the principal newspapers were published every hour, containing such intelligence as 'His most gracious Majesty remains in the same condition;' 'The pain in his most gracious Majesty's head continues unabated;' 'His most gracious Majesty is no worse;' 'His most gracious Majesty is no better;' 'No change to report;' 'His most gracious Majesty has eaten his dinner.' In this way the appetite and anxiety of the subjects of King Sassafras were in some measure appeased.

And all this while, King Sassafras, quite unaware of the excitement he was creating, was laughing in his sleeve.

He was shamming illness, not for the first time, for the purpose of having a few hours' quietude. He saw no other way of being let alone for a short while. There was not the least cause for anxiety. He

was as well in health as you and I are, but he was wearied almost to death by the fêtes and ceremonies given in honour of the King of Kings, and in which he had had to play so prominent a part. He had during all that time been disgusted with himself for having had to do this and that in the way of pumped-up hospitality to this barbarian; for, entertaining as he did a profound contempt for this man, and a profound horror of his ideas and notions, Sassafras would have been inclined to teach him a different lesson from that which he must have learned during his visit. However, on this point he had, if he wanted any peace, to keep his opinion to himself, and he was heartily glad when the barbarian ruler quitted the shores of No-land, and the absurd and senseless pomp was at an end.

He was alone now in his private apartment. Books and papers were scattered on the floor and on the sofa on which he was lying. He had been reading for fully two hours, and his desire that he should be undisturbed had thus far been obeyed. On his features, as he read, were exhibited signs of doubt

and perplexity, and he was so deeply interested in his pursuit as not to hear a knock at the door, thrice repeated. Presently, with caution and timidity, the door was opened.

'Your most gracious Majesty—'

It was Lord Crabtree who spoke. The King looked up and frowned. Then he remembered that he was sick, and he put his hand to his head, and groaned. Lord Crabtree's face assumed an expression of most anxious sympathy.

'Your Majesty still suffers, I regret to see.'

King Sassafras groaned again, and shifted his position fretfully.

'Will your most gracious Majesty see the royal physicians?'

'No, my lord. Repose is what I require—perfect repose. Solitude is the only medicine that can do me good—with no one to worry me—with no old chatterpate to set my head a-singing.'

Lord Crabtree did not take the hint—being too dull, perhaps, to understand it.

'The royal physicians have held a consultation upon the state of your Majesty's health.'

'That is the fifth to-day. Dear! dear! Why do they trouble themselves so much?'

'The trouble's a pleasure,' said Lord Crabtree, quoting a common form of politeness, and unaware of its inappropriateness on the present occasion. 'They say that your gracious Majesty reads too much.'

'The royal physicians are a set of—very worthy fellows. But tell me, my Lord Crabtree, should not a king make himself acquainted with what goes on in his kingdom?'

'It is scarcely necessary, your Majesty,' replied Lord Crabtree; 'your Majesty is in the happy position of being spared the trouble of thinking. You are surrounded by servants who joyfully take that labour upon themselves.'

'Servants such as yourself, my Lord Crabtree.'

'Such as myself, your Majesty.'

'Servants who cut and measure my life as a tailor cuts and measures his cloth. But we live two lives, my lord.'

'I do not understand your gracious Majesty.'

'An outer and an inner life. My outer life you may cut, and measure, and snip; but my inner life—and King Sassafras touched his head and his heart—is my own, and no tape of yours shall measure it.'

Lord Crabtree bowed, vainly striving to banish the look of alarm which had overspread his features when King Sassafras had touched his forehead.

'Therefore,' continued the King, 'I deem it necessary to learn what my subjects are doing—how arts and learning progress, or whether they do progress—how my subjects amuse themselves—what changes are being made in the social life—whether the people are contented—and what views are held by different classes. How am I to gain this knowledge? But through one medium that I can see—printed paper. Books and newspapers. See—here they are.' Sassafras looked round wearily, and repeated, 'Books and newspapers! Books and newspapers! My Lord Crabtree, they are sufficient to drive a

weak mind to idiocy. I have read and read until I am fairly bewildered. The fever of this life is too much for me. I am racked with anxiety. I am torn to pieces by doubt. The past and the future weigh me down. What now is the present to me? Yesterday I was a monkey, and to-morrow I shall have no coals to burn!

Sassafras walked about the room with a disturbed air; but presently, seeing Lord Crabtree's anxious eyes watching him, he laughed merrily, and clapping the old nobleman on the shoulder, said in a gay tone, 'Never mind my wild words, my lord; kings must have their humours.'

'Your Majesty's merry mood delights me.'

'A true courtier's speech. But come, my lord, you had a motive in intruding upon me.'

'Indeed, your Majesty, if I might make so bold—'

'To the point, my lord; to the point. Your motive.'

But it was impossible for Lord Crabtree to come to the point without going round about. It is the way of such.

'If it might please your Majesty to forgive your loyal servant and subject—'

'You are forgiven. Proceed.'

'I would humbly crave an audience to speak with your Majesty privately upon a subject most important to yourself and to the nation—a vital subject, your Majesty.'

'Therefore an unpleasant one.'

'Not at all, your Majesty,' said Lord Crabtree, with a giggle. 'Pleasant and joyful! Pleasant and joyful!'

'Pleasant and joyful! name it.' With a preparatory smack of his lips, Lord Crabtree replied, 'Marriage.'

King Sassafras looked thoughtfully and gravely at his Confidential Worryer.

'A pleasant and sacred subject, my lord. I will listen to what you have to say.'

The King settled himself comfortably in an easy-chair. Lord Crabtree, thus encouraged, cleared his throat and proceeded.

'Your most gracious Majesty's health is not good.'

'Truly, my lord; I suffer much. What has that to do with the subject in hand?'

'Your Majesty, marriage is good for the health.'

'Ah! and I am to take it as if it were a pill.'

'Your Majesty's wit is transcendent. Will your Majesty, looking upon me for the nonce in the light of a physician—and I may consider myself one on this subject, having lived matrimonially for seven-and-twenty years—condescend to explain to me the ordinary symptoms of your sickness?'

'My symptoms! Let me think. First, my lord, a general weariness.'

'Good—good. A disinclination for society.'

'Especially for society that bores me. A desire for solitude—a wish that I could shut the door upon the world, and be let alone. Then an inclination to make myself disagreeable, from which I am sure, my lord, you have suffered much. Then a general peevishness, and a tendency to believe that most things are wrong.'

'As I expected, your Majesty. A complete disorganisation of the system.'

'Precisely. Leading me to take distorted views of things. As, for instance, that absurd comparison of mine the other day concerning the Garden and the Present. You must have been much astonished, my lord, at my wild words.'

'I was, your Majesty, I was. I have thought seriously and deeply upon your Majesty's remarks about that garden—have put all my mind to them—and I have been unable to arrive at an understanding of them.'

'I do not wonder at it, my lord. Are my symptoms such as you imagined?'

'Your Majesty, they tally exactly with the diagnosis I have made of your Majesty's health. And the royal physicians are with me.'

In this way Lord Crabtree placed himself above the royal physicians.

'And you still prescribe—'

'Marriage, your Majesty. The pleasantest medicine!'

'Have you found it so, my lord?'

Lord Crabtree winced slightly.

'Lady Crabtree and I are of one mind upon that, your Majesty. Nothing could have been better—nothing could have been better.' But his voice was not remarkable for cheerfulness as he made the declaration.

'I desire no greater happiness,' said King Sassafras, in a musing tone, 'than to mate with one to whom my heart is drawn. A partnership of hearts and souls, my lord, as well as of hands. Heaven upon earth must be realised in the perfect joy of such an union.'

Lord Crabtree listened with delight. All was going on swimmingly.

'The wisest man, your Majesty, that ever lived—'

The fussy, fidgety manner of Lord Crabtree changed the King's humour.

'Surely the man lives not in my kingdom, my lord? His name?'

'The great King Solomon, your Majesty. He, who knew how to rightly estimate all things, spoke in favour of matrimony.'

'Gave his vote for it. I cannot call to mind the manner or the matter of his testimony.'

'Did he not say that a virtuous woman was a crown of something to her husband? I forget the precise words.'

'Something in the jewel way, doubtless, as a woman was in question. He should have known the value of a wife. He had a thousand who ought to have stood to him in that connection.'

'Has your Majesty ever given the matter a thought?' inquired Lord Crabtree.

'I have, my lord; many and many a dream have I indulged in, in which I have pictured the pure delights which wait on mutual love. Is it possible that such happiness can ever be mine?' He rose and paced the room with an agitated air. 'Can it ever, ever be? Or am I doomed to be denied the sweetest blessing which life contains? My lord, I can see the woman I would fain call my queen.'

'See her, your Majesty!' and Lord Crabtree looked about him anxiously, in the fear that some

fair nymph was concealed behind the curtains.

'She is here, my lord,' said King Sassafras, touching his forehead, and, relieved of his fears, Lord Crabtree gave a sigh of relief. 'If one could find her now! And if there was no obstacle in the way!'

He paused before Lord Crabtree, and the old courtier leant forward, and rubbed his hands to and fro upon his knees, and clucked like an old hen.

'What obstacle can there be in the way, your Majesty? What other gentleman in the world can choose as your Majesty can choose, with the certainty of being blessed? Not that but the lady will be much more blessed. A happy, happy lady! A queen whom all will envy!' And Lord Crabtree rubbed his hands more vigorously upon his shaky old knees.

King Sassafras gazed upon him with suspicion. 'I do not understand, my lord.'

'If one could find her now!' chuckled Lord Crabtree. 'If one could find her now! That is what your Majesty said. He! he! he!' And having had his wheezy old laugh out, Lord Crabtree whispered confidentially, 'Your Majesty, we have found her!'

The King started back, and his face grew pale.

'You have found her!' he echoed.

Lord Crabtree was so enthusiastic in his purpose that he did not observe the expression on his royal master's countenance.

'We have found her, your Majesty! A Princess in whose veins runs the blood of half a hundred kings. A Princess whose lineage

will add honour and lustre even to the House of Sassafras. A Princess who—'

'Stop, my lord. Of what lady are you speaking?'

'The Princess Calla, your Majesty, whom you met, doubtless, in your travels. A girl then; a woman now. A Princess out of a thousand, your Majesty! Happy, happy day!'

'Say no more, my lord,' cried the King haughtily. 'So! you have measured even this part of my life for me. This is the union of hearts and souls that you propose to me. Why, my lord, you must think me a very puppet, or something worse! The lady to whom you refer I never met in my travels; she never saw me, nor I her. I know her, of course, as does all the world, as the daughter of a great king, and that is all. She speaks not a word of my language, nor I a word of hers. From the different circumstances of our lives, from the opposite natures of the peoples over whom her royal father and I reign, it is almost impossible that we can have one sentiment in common. Our laws are different; our institutions are different; our religions are different. I love my country; I love my people, cut off from them as it seems to me I am. What would the world be but for love? and am I to be deprived of it because I had the misfortune to be born a prince? If I met with one of my own people in whose breast dwells all that is pure and good and innocent, and to whom my heart is drawn by that sweet sentiment which humanises the world, why should I not mate with her?'

Lord Crabtree clasped his hands, with a cry of dismay which he could not check, and the King, whose last words had been addressed to his own soul as it were, said sternly,

'Mark me, my lord. This part of my life shall not be measured for me. When I marry, I choose for myself!'

'It is against all precedent, your Majesty,' whimpered Lord Crabtree, in anguish. 'I beg, I implore your Majesty to reflect!'

'No reflection is necessary. Why should I be deprived of a man's dearest privilege? My lord, I will dispense with your farther attendance to-day.'

'I entreat your most gracious Majesty to allow me one more word.'

'Quickly, then.'

'If any lady has been happy enough to attract your Majesty's notice,' said Lord Crabtree, his head wagging from one side to the other, in deep distress; 'if your Majesty's eye has been captivated by beauty—we old men know from experience how hard it is to restrain young blood!—(the King stamped his foot impatiently)—'if your Majesty has any private attachment—'

'Well, my lord! What then?'

Lord Crabtree was in agony. The King's last words seemed to admit of the existence of a private attachment. The old lord had a thought to express, but he did not know how to shape it in words.

'Your Majesty, consider, I implore you. Do not commit yourself. Do nothing rash.'

'Speak plainly, my lord. Say that I have a private attachment.

Say that I have met a lady whom I love. Well?'

'Your Majesty,' said Lord Crabtree, with tears in his eyes, 'would not surely think—think of—of—'

'Of what, my lord? Speak out, like a man.'

'Of marrying, your Majesty? Your Majesty would not surely think of that?'

The King's eyes glittered. 'What else should I think of with reference to a woman whom I love?'

'Anything, your Majesty,' cried Lord Crabtree, wringing his hands. 'Anything—anything! Women are easily satisfied. What would a woman not give for a king's smile, for a king's embrace! Your Majesty does not know—the honour of the royal notice—even, if the worst came to the worst, a morganatic marriage—easily managed, your Majesty, easily——' But Lord Crabtree was obliged to pause in his floundering speech. The King's strong hand had grasped his shoulders so firmly that he winced with pain.

'Enough, my lord,' said Sassafras, in clear scornful tones. 'I forbid you to speak another word. Leave me; and take with you this assurance. No example of mine shall ever weaken or degrade in my people's eyes the sanctity of the marriage bond. I am but a man, and in this am no better than the humblest of my subjects. What would be crime in him is crime in me. No convenient winking of the eyes on the part of priests and laymen can make it otherwise. The shame of a left-handed marriage shall not rest upon my name. When I marry, I marry with my right hand. And my heart shall be in it!'



IX.

THE QUAMOELITS AND THE WHORTLEBERRIES.

FROM the date of this conversation, Sassafras spent more time than ever in his private lodge, and it was quite a common thing for the lords-in-waiting to be informed three and four times a week that his Majesty had gone to his lodge, and had given orders that he was not to be disturbed. The lodge began to be talked about, and queer things were said concerning it. With reference to the King's conduct and his growing desire for seclusion, the lords-in-waiting, with Lord Crabtree at their head, decided in consultation that although matters were not as they should be, their wisest course at present was to humour his eccentric Majesty. When the Court Newsman asked Lord Crabtree what he should say

in his daily report concerning the movements of the King, he was told to write: 'His Majesty walked in the royal grounds.' But this line was repeated so many times when Sassafras was not seen in the royal grounds, that it set tongues a-wagging even among the attendants, and it began to be a saying, when any one was on a sly expedition, that he was walking in the royal grounds. A bit of gossip, with the flavour of scandal in it, is as delightful to a duchess as to a washerwoman. Some of them even went so far as to wink at each other, and to touch their noses with their forefingers.

But these Palace tongues wagged discreetly, and a sort of freemasonry was established in the wink-

ing of eyes and the touching of noses, to which only the select were admitted. Outside the Palace, tongues, eyes, and noses were not so discreet. Numbers of people were busy putting two and two together, as the saying is. The saying was not sufficiently explicit in this instance, for instead of putting two and two, the gossipers and tittle-tattlers were busy putting one and one together. And one was Sassafras and one was a lady. The presence of Sassafras was always necessary for the correct doing of the sum; the lady was sometimes changed. The misfortune was that all sorts of things got mixed up together, in consequence. One thing leads to another, it is true, but there is often not the slightest relationship between one and another.

It had been intended that the proposed matrimonial alliance between King Sassafras and the Princess Calla should be kept a profound secret; but somehow or other the news leaked out, and it was spread abroad that his Majesty declined to entertain the proposal. The newspapers of good repute said as little about it as possible, for political reasons, but the matter was not allowed to die out because they were silent.

There resided in No-land a very prolific tribe, whose family name was Quamoclit. Great numbers of the members of this family were to be found in every town, city, and hamlet of the kingdom. The smallest villages were not free from them. Their prying eyes were in every street, and so powerful were those eyes that they could pierce

stone walls, and see what was going on inside; their tongues wagged at every corner; they stopped at every convenient post, and touched noses, with a knowing air. These Quamoclit made grand use of their noses, for they poked them everywhere, especially in those places where they were least wanted. They scented the news of the King's refusal to contract an alliance with the Princess Calla as bees scent honey, and the owners of these clever features went round and about whispering to each other, and making friends of each other's buttons, which they contemplated with pensive affection as they tittle-tattled. So the King would not marry! they said to one another. Strange! was it not? (Here they winked.) There must be a reason for it. O, yes; there must be a reason for it. Do you know? Hm! Do you? (Here they touched their noses.) Well, we have heard something. Indeed! But it must not be repeated—no, not for the world. It was strange, and the more one thought of it the stranger it was. His Majesty was often absent from the Palace now! (Here they looked mysteriously at one another.) Indeed? O, yes; for hours together. Perhaps he was in the Palace all the while! Perhaps. Hm! hm! hm! Even Lord Crabtree was kept in the dark. Curious! was it not? Then there is that lodge which he will allow no one but himself to enter. What tales those walls could tell if they could speak! Very mysterious; very. A lady in the case. (Here they winked, and touched their noses, and looked knowingly at one another, all at one time.) Hush-

sh-sh! How can you? Well, we did hear yesterday that hm! hm! hm! You won't tell anybody, will you? I had it from—hm! hm! In strict confidence, you know.

Thus they talked and whispered, and, as our ingenious brethren in the West would doubtless say, innuendoed. For our Western brethren—who also have their Quamoclit—are great at the turning of nouns into verbs.

But these Quamoclit did still greater mischief. Some of them had newspapers of their own, or were employed upon newspapers, and the King's refusal of the hand of the Princess Calla was a pet theme in their leading articles and special correspondence. They stretched it wantonly as they would a piece of india-rubber, until they made rents and holes in it. In a very short time it was twisted out of all resemblance to itself.

There was another tribe in No-land to whom this dish was like the spice of Arabia. Whortleberry was the name of this tribe. These Whortleberries also possessed a newspaper or two, and in the columns of their papers the dish was served up in a hundred ways, with the very hottest seasoning.

Some of these papers fell into the hands of King Sassafras. Some of the remarks which were made concerning him came to his knowledge.

'Good God!' he cried. 'Is it possible that I can be such a monster?'

Stung in the tenderest part of him—his manhood—he threw aside all counsel, and in direct opposition to the advice of his Confiden-

tial Worryers, he read and studied what was written about him. The more he read the more he was distressed. The more he heard the more he grieved. Had he, in his royal station, possessed a friend like Coltsfoot, he might have turned some of the experience he was gaining to good account; but he was surrounded by flatterers and fawners and court-parasites, who would have been well content to see him spend his life as his father had done. He blushed when he was told that his person was sacred, that he, above all other men, was watched over by a special Providence, and that he was hedged round by divinity.

'If this be true,' he mused, 'I am something more than human.'

He trembled from sensitive shame, for he knew that it was false.

'And yet,' he thought, pursuing his reflections, 'did not the barbarian ruler who lately visited No-land arrogate to himself the awful title of King of Kings? It is monstrous—monstrous and wicked! Surely that title can only be held by the Great and Merciful King who rules over all!'

But if he mentally protested against being held up as a kind of sacred symbol—if he set aside (as he did, with scorn) the idea that his rights were more divine than those of other men, he was filled with just indignation by what he read concerning himself in the papers owned by the Whortleberries. According to these organs, he was either the feeblest fool that ever breathed, with soul so warped by the pursuit of sensual and sensuous pleasure

as to be deaf and blind to the misery which surrounded him, or he was directly responsible and accountable for all the evil and suffering which existed in the land.

'If either of these be true,' he mused with troubled soul, 'I am indeed less than human—more akin to brute than man.'

He said to Coltsfoot, 'What is your opinion of kings, Coltsfoot?'

It was rarely that Coltsfoot was in a light humour, but he happened to be so upon this occasion.

'I myself,' he said with a light laugh, 'happened to put that very question once to an amiable cynic. He answered that they were necessary evils.'

Every nerve in Sassafras's body tingled, quivered with pain. Although Coltsfoot had but repeated the words of another man, and although he had spoken lightly, a slight dash of scorn in the speaker's tone tinged them with a personal bitterness.

'Of our King, now,' continued Sassafras, controlling his agitation, 'Sassafras? What do you think of him?'

'I have never seen him.'

'But,' insisted Sassafras, 'you have your idea concerning him. What do you think of him?'

'At the best,' replied Coltsfoot, shrugging his shoulders, 'he is nothing more than a puppet. Set aside the pomp and glitter which surround him, and he becomes, in himself and by himself, utterly insignificant.'

The tone of indifference in which this was uttered stung Sassafras

more deeply even than Coltsfoot's previous utterance.

'Is your opinion general?' he asked.

'No; some few would express themselves in similar terms; a larger number would be more violent in the same direction. On the other hand, there are many thousands who regard King Sassafras with an admiration which approaches idolatry. There are ladies in the fashionable world who would think it no extravagance to kiss the ground he walks upon, and who see in him qualities so transcendent as to seriously warp their moral sense. To their minds, a king sanctifies whatever he touches. Let me tell you a story that is current. Some years since a prince of another land was sent upon his travels; he was a person distinguished for good humour and amiability of disposition. He travelled the world, and opportunities were given to him of seeing what no other man had seen in a lifetime, and he was received everywhere with grand demonstrations, and was cordially welcomed. In a certain flourishing city, a dependency of the empire of which he was a representative, the fashionable men and women—especially the latter—went almost mad in the ecstasy of their admiration. Towels that he wiped his hands upon were torn into fragments, and the pieces were taken home by the ladies as relics; the ends of the cigarettes he smoked were picked up as he threw them away, and religiously preserved. It would be the same, I doubt not, with our own King Sassafras. He is to them a visible god, whom they

worship, not with indifference and languor, as most of them worship in the churches, but with an enthusiasm which is as lamentable as it is extravagant.' Coltsfoot paused for a few moments; his light mood had passed away and he was now serious and thoughtful. 'It may be said by many unprejudiced lookers-on that these are harmless follies; I differ from them. The persons who practise them are seriously in earnest, and they belong to the classes which set the fashions for the people—the fashions in conduct and behaviour at home and in the streets—the fashions in dress (in itself an educator), and even in morals, a convertible word, unfortunately, nowadays. The lowly are taught always to aspire, to look up, and they look up to these persons and aspire to their follies. I would promote mirth, pleasure, and rational enjoyment by every means in my power; but I would set my heel upon these sinful extravagances, which are practised by persons whose education and position should teach them how to make better use of the advantages they enjoy. There are in life sweeter fashions than these to follow.'

'Is the King to blame for all these things?' said Sassafras with downcast looks.

'He is but a young man,' replied Coltsfoot; 'it would be most unjust to say that he is responsible for the bad systems which have grown out of the lust for pleasure and ease. He is much to be pitied.'

'Truly,' said Sassafras gravely. 'I think so too. See here what they say about him.'

Coltsfoot read the slanders in the paper which Sassafras handed to him and said,

'This is one of the reasons why I think the King is to be pitied. I have often seen the person who edits this paper.'

'Is he in earnest? Is he sincere?' inquired Sassafras anxiously.

'I should be sorry to shake hands with him,' replied Coltsfoot. 'He does what pays him best. Before he became a paper politician he gained a name among the poor and ignorant by writing lewd stories—stories which strike at the very foundation of morality, and which are a disgrace to the literature of No-land. But the people have worthier champions than he, and some of their cheap weekly papers which I could name, and which circulate largely among them, are doing honest and wholesome work, which is bearing good fruit to-day, and will bear better by and by. But enough of this. Let us go and see our little fiddlers.'

* * * * *
Turn we from these troublous matters. A quieter sweeter theme invites us. While the wild winds are raging in one place, light breezes float in another, where the storm-tossed soul can find repose. Cast your eyes over the world, and you will see in the same moment the white snow falling and the bright rose unfolding its leaves—the brown leaves fluttering to the ground in the sad pensive light of an evening in autumn, and the green branches, with the dew glistening upon them, laughing into bud in the light of a sweet fresh morning in spring.

X.

SWEET IS THE AIR NOW AND FOR EVER; HEART WHISPERS LOW, CHANGE WILL COME NEVER!

THE old country lane is sweet with the fragrance of a bright mid-summer. The hedgerows are beautiful in their luxuriance of wild rose, bluebell, and honeysuckle. Myriad tiny blossoms, with eyes of scarlet and purple and gold, are peeping out beneath the richly-laden thickets, and smiling in the face of the drowsy clouds.

Here and there are clusters of tiny silver eyes. At a little distance they look like pure white tears. They might be, for before the sun rose this morning the rain fell. And as it fell it stirred everything into life, and brought out the most precious odours of all the sweet-smelling plants. When the fragrant air, on its way to the clouds, reached the nests of the waking birds, they stretched their wings and bathed in it, piping their blithest notes.

In a very small and very old cottage, so covered with ivy and moss as to warrant the fancy that it must have grown out of the earth as the flowers and trees do, sits an old woman shelling peas. Every now and then she looks out of window. A yellow basin is in her lap, and the freshly-gathered young peas are in a wicker basket by her side; her brown bony fingers never cease from their task. The window by which she is sitting is open, and she is almost within arm's reach of a young girl, who sits in the cottage porch in a framework of creeping honeysuckle. The twin-

ing plants bend about her and above her wooingly. She is as fair as the summer day, as sweet as the air which steals through the porch to kiss her, and then wanders on rejoicing.

Her pretty lips are parted, so that you may catch a glimpse of her pearly teeth; the light in her soft and luminous eyes seems to be turned inwards, as though she is looking on her soul; a happy sigh escapes her bosom now and then. She is day-dreaming, but it would not be possible to picture her dreams. Say that they are composed of sweet warm colour, which makes the present and the future beautiful and peaceful; say that summer is in her soul, and all is said that can be said.

Her name is Bluebell. Dame Endive is the name of the old woman.

In this rustic cottage dwell four persons: Spring and Winter in the persons of Bluebell and Dame Endive; Coltsfoot, Dame Endive's son; and Ragged Robin, Bluebell's brother.

There are four rooms in the cottage—two above, two below. The room above the porch, the window of which, with its closely-latticed panes, you see peeping out of its green nest, is the bedroom occupied by Bluebell and Dame Endive. The room behind that, which looks down upon a small kitchen-garden from which the peas have been gathered, is the sleeping room

of Ragged Robin. Coltsfoot sleeps in a little room behind his school-house, which is not at a great distance from the cottage.

Bluebell is making baskets with slender reeds and willows and differently-coloured grasses; she is very cunning and clever in the weaving of them, and seems to invest them with something of her own grace and beauty and freshness. They are very fragile, and require delicate handling; but they are so pretty that Dame Endive finds a ready sale for them in the market that is held once a week about two miles distant from the cottage. Ladies buy them as well as country-women, and they grace many a drawing-room round about. Dame Endive, who has led a hard-working industrious life, is very happy to have something to do in her old age—something, too, that brings in money towards the expenses of the household. The baskets are light, and easy to carry, and on the market-day Bluebell hangs them about the old woman's breast and shoulders, and she starts in the early morning, a living network of bright moving colour. The baskets are of various shapes—very fantastic some of them—and as the old woman moves slowly along, assisted by her crutch-stick, she makes quite a picture. When she stops to rest, the birds hover about her, and some who have grown familiar with her are bold enough to perch upon the baskets that hang from the old woman's back, and enjoy a ride without paying for it.

'The day is beautiful, my dear,' pipes Dame Endive from her window.

Bluebell awakes from her dream, and nods and smiles. She is as beautiful and as happy as the day. She wears a light cotton dress, with a small lilac sprig; her hair has escaped from its confinement, and garlands her neck. Dame Endive's cotton dress is of a darker hue, and her white hair is enclosed in a cap as white. This, although it is the middle of the week, is a gala day. Eighteen years ago Bluebell was born.

'Coltsfoot will give his school-children a half-holiday,' says Dame Endive, in her shrill voice.

'How do you know, mother?' asks Bluebell. 'Did he tell you?'

'No, my dear; but he'll do it. I don't need my son to tell me things. I can read *him* though I can't read print, and though my old eyes are not as good as they were.'

Her old eyes are now, in fact, peering down the road for her son, who is not due for a long time yet. It wants an hour to noon, and half an hour after noon the dinner will be ready, and then the rest of the day will be spent in quiet holiday fashion in honour of Bluebell. Soon Bluebell gathers up her work, and goes into the cottage to look after the dinner. Before she quits the porch, she also looks down the lane.

'Do you see him coming, my dear?' asks the old woman.

Bluebell blushes, and shakes her head. When she is inside the cottage, Dame Endive grows garrulous over the virtues and accomplishments of her son, and dilates with pardonable pride upon the estimation in which he is held by

all who know him. Bluebell listens, and says 'Yes, yes,' to everything the old woman advances, and Dame Endive gazes on her with secret delight and pleasure.

Coltsfoot and Robin come. Each has flowers for Bluebell. She selects two of the prettiest, one from each bunch, and twines them in her hair. Robin is a strong sunburnt man now. Woodman as he is, he belongs to the thinking classes, for he has his grievance—that two shillings a week more, which is to set everything right. He gives Bluebell a sounding kiss, and wipes his lips afterwards. A strong yearning comes into Coltsfoot's face as he takes Bluebell's hand in his, and wishes her joy. As he stands thus, his old mother calls out,

'What! and not kiss her on such a day as this? Well, if I was a man!'

Whereupon Bluebell holds up her face, and he touches her cheek with his lips. The old woman cackles and laughs.

'May your life contain much brightness, Bluebell!' says Coltsfoot tenderly.

She answers sweetly, and bustles about to hide a tear. Joy and melancholy hold subtle relationship with each other.

Along the fragrant country lane, in the direction of the cottage, Sassafras is strolling. When he is within hail of it he pauses and looks fondly about him. The beauty of nature sinks into his soul, and breathes peace into it. He sighs with a sense of relief, as he thinks that he is here, unknown and free, away from the cares and griefs which weigh so heavily upon him.

'Has any other man,' he murmurs, 'ever so fully appreciated the pleasures of obscurity?' The reflection inspires the shadow of serious thought. He shakes it off. 'Thank God,' he says, 'to-day I am not a king!'

He approaches nearer to the cottage; enters the porch. They with- in see his face at the window, and they all smile a welcome. Bluebell runs to open the door for him. He also has a flower for her; it is a rosebud with a small piece of rosemary attached. She places it in her bosom, and in a few moments they are all sitting down to dinner, and Sassafras is declaring that the peas are the sweetest that he has ever tasted.

'And I'll wager,' he says, 'that I know who gathered them.'

'Yes, yes,' cackles the old woman, 'Bluebell gathered them. My old joints are stiff. I can't stoop as I used to.'

Robin is full of a subject which interests him hugely. For some time past there had been rumours that the labourers in No-land—those who tilled and ploughed—were becoming dissatisfied with their condition, and that very week news had come that in a village hard by thirty of them had refused to do any more work for their masters, the farmers, unless they had two shillings a week more. Robin shows himself to be quite a politician as he descants upon this theme, but the others decline to be drawn into conversation upon the subject. Sassafras certainly says that for his part he thinks he should like to be a woodman. Bluebell's eyes sparkle.



'Eh,' says Robin, 'but your hands are too soft.'

'They would soon grow hard,' replies Sassafras.

Then Robin recalls the day on which they had first met, and tells, for the hundredth time, what a queer chap he thought Sassafras was.

'He didn't know naught,' cries Robin, with a snap of his fingers; 'he was the ignorantest chap I ever clapped eyes on!'

After dinner they sat in the porch, talking. Sassafras listens and says very little. He sits next to Bluebell, and this for him is sufficient happiness. There is to him something sacred in the very touch of this young girl's cotton dress; and if their fingers meet—as they do sometimes—every nerve in him

thrills. Robin succeeds in drawing Coltsfoot out upon his pet theme. Coltsfoot, who knows the exact state of affairs, sympathises with the men, and wishes that their reasonable demands had been complied with. Their condition he describes as lamentable.

'They are waking up now though,' shouts Robin triumphantly.

'But notwithstanding that they have reason and justice on their side,' observes Coltsfoot, 'they have a hard battle to fight. The issue in the end cannot be doubted, but they will have to suffer. One does not need much for comfort and happiness in this world, and a man can do very well on a little; but these men certainly have not enough, and certainly are most un-

fairly paid for their labour. We'll say no more on the subject; this is not the day for its discussion.'

In the afternoon they stroll through the fields and the woods, and Robin and Bluebell point out many wonders by the way. They are the happiest of the happy. Coltsfoot's usually grave face breaks into smiles, and he joins in the innocent merriment with the light spirits of a boy.

'I know where there is an echo,' says Sassafras.

'Let us go there,' cries Bluebell, clapping her hands.

They make their way through tangled brushwood, Sassafras leading. Now and then he turns, and assists Bluebell. With her hand in his he helps her to overcome obstacles.

'Eternity must be filled with such days as this,' he says.

Bluebell sighs a happy assent. Now and then Sassafras runs to help Dame Endive.

'Thank you, my dear,' she says; 'it is fit that the young should help the old.'

Coltsfoot hears this. 'You are right, mother,' he says; 'and the rich, the poor; the wise, the ignorant.'

'Too much wisdom is a dangerous thing,' observes Sassafras. He is in the humour to say any daring thing.

Now they are standing on a slight elevation. A few hundred yards away, where the land slopes towards a wood, rich with the richest treasures of the seasons, lies echo-land. Thitherward they walk briskly, and in another moment the inspired hollow speaks and laughs and sings.

'Hush!' calls out Sassafras, with assumed solemnity.

'Hush!' responds the hollow solemnly.

They gather about Sassafras. Coltsfoot regards him and Bluebell attentively; Bluebell has eyes for no one but him; Dame Endive, leaning on her crutch-stick, peers up at him from beneath her spectacles; Robin waves his arms, and is about to utter some wild words, when Sassafras, with his fingers on his lips, says almost in a whisper, 'Speak low, or the old fellow will hear you.'

'What old fellow?' asks Robin, with a laugh.

'The old fellow who is hiding behind that clump of trees beyond. Did you not hear him call out to us to Hush! You look incredulous. Because you do not see him, you think there is no old fellow there. But I declare he is there—an old gray-haired man, with serious eyes and a long beard. He bade us Hush! because we were too merry. He has been there ever so many hundreds of years. The wood is haunted, and the old graybeard is but one of a great army of spirits who retreat into the hollows at the first sound of human footsteps. His voice is harsh and strong, but he has children whose softer voices mock the sighing wind as it glides past them.'

'A pretty fancy,' says Coltsfoot, regarding Sassafras with tender interest, and yet with a strange admixture of seriousness.

A solemn look is in Bluebell's eyes as Sassafras describes the echo-king, and Sassafras, seeing this, breaks into a laugh, which is

so contagious that, like magic, the hollow is filled with merry sound.

'Hark!' he cries, holding up again a warning finger. 'Those are the young spirits who are laughing. There are merry ones, and old ones, if we could only see them.'

'What are they like?' asks Bluebell, bending towards him, her face flushed with excitement. 'What are they like?'

'Some of them are almost as pretty as Bluebell here. They have sparkling eyes, and in the golden hair which floats down to their feet sun-sparkles chase each other. In the summer they sing with the birds. It is they who drink the dew from the leaves.'

'And in the winter?'

'They bind their hair with garlands of holly and laurel, and enchant into beautiful devices the hoar-frost on the branches of the trees. They peep into the icicles, and melt them with the fire of their eyes. If they hear any one laugh, they laugh and are happy. Then the old fellow with the long beard shivers and grunts and stamps his feet and blows upon his fingers. I like best to hear the young spirits. One night we will come here and watch them when they do not think we are looking.'

Then Sassafras turns to Bluebell, and asks in a tender tone if she will sing a song, and Bluebell in a sweet voice sings, and the hollow echoes her song, but not so sweetly:

'All things are fair ;
Nature rejoices ;
Valley and hill
Thrill with sweet voices —
All things are fair.

Sweet is the air
Now and for ever ;
Heart whispers low,
Change will come never —
All things are fair.

Look where I will
Sunlight's bright glances
Fill me with joy.
How my heart dances!
All things are fair.'

'That is my son's song,' says Dame Endive to Sassafras, with a proud look at Coltsfoot; 'he wrote it for Bluebell.'

'Your son is a poet.'

'He is anything he likes,' responds the fond mother; 'he knows a mighty deal. He's a man; there isn't a cleverer in No-land. Where he got all his learning from, gracious only knows, for I'm no scholar. But knowledge comes to him as seeks, I suppose. Ah, the nights he sat up when he was a boy! — You must not credit all that my mother says about me,' says Coltsfoot, joining them. 'Mothers are over-fond. I guess she is speaking of me.'

'Tisn't me, my son,' says Dame Endive; 'tis him. He says you're a poet, and he says right. He's a lad of sense.'

Coltsfoot shakes his head.

'Because of my simple lines? Nay, if there is a poet among us, it is our dear friend here, who has just woven such pretty fancies out of the echoes. There is nothing fanciful in my verses. They fit Bluebell. All things are fair to her. I wrote them when I was in a happy, hopeful mood.'

He utters these last words in a saddened tone, which, as the breeze awakes the lyre, stirs the mother's heart, and causes her to look with

sudden apprehension into the face of her son ; from his face her eyes wander to the face of Sassafras, and a frowning light shines in them. Coltsfoot, self-engrossed in painful thought, does not observe these signs. 'Come, mother,' he says, 'you and I will stroll quietly to some shady nook, and sit there ; I want to talk to you where there are no echoes.'

'Ay, my son,' she replies, tenderly and piteously ; 'a mother's love 'll not fail you.'

Mother and son walk away ; Robin is wandering by himself in the woods ; Sassafras and Bluebell are left alone.

'This sweetest of days,' murmurs Sassafras, in a tone which trembles from excess of feeling, 'has filled my life with tender memories.'

They walk slowly, as in a dream, and Bluebell presently seats herself upon the mossed outspreading trunk of a grand old tree ; Sassafras lies on the ground at her feet. A spiritual beauty dwells in Bluebell's face ; her soul is in perfect harmony with the beauty of the day. Her hands are resting on her lap ; Sassafras, timidly and with beating heart, lays his hand upon hers, and softly imprisons it. She trembles and looks down, but she does not shrink from him. Her pure soul trusts in him utterly. Thus they sit in silence for fully half an hour, which seems but a few moments, the time flies so swiftly. But when a falling leaf, or the fluttering of a bird's wings, disturbs the fine current of her waking dream, Bluebell sees the eyes of Sassafras gazing so ear-

nestly and tenderly into hers, that a new-born joy awakes in her heart, and her gentle breast is stirred by an emotion so exquisitely sweet as to border almost upon pain.

'If it *were* so, Bluebell,' whispers Sassafras, 'if it were so ! Now and for ever, heart whispers low, change will come never ! If change would never come ! If we could remain thus for ever ! How fair, how beautiful is the world !'

Bluebell looks upwards.

'There is a fairer world even than this,' she says softly.

'I could kneel at your feet, and pray.'

He does kneel at her feet, and clasps her hands, which she yields willingly to him.

'If during the moments that are now passing we ourselves should pass away, then death would surely be beautiful.'

'Why speak of death ?' says Bluebell. 'Why wish for it ? The world is very good. God saw that it was so.'

They fall into silence again for a brief space ; but the lengthening shadows of the trees warn Sassafras that they must soon depart. He raises himself closer to Bluebell, and invites her to stroll to a peep of sunlight in the distance. They walk hand in hand towards a small glade ; the trees, which form a semi-circle, throw quaint shadows on the ground.

'One can fancy the echo-spirits dancing here,' says Sassafras. 'On a moonlight night the shadows of the trees moving in the wind would present a strange and weird-like appearance. Bluebell, I have not wished you happy returns of the

day. I do so now, dear. May they all be as happy as this has been !'

She thanks him sweetly, and says that it is not to be expected. Life has its duties and cares ; she knows this, not from her own experience, for everybody is very good to her, but from what Coltsfoot has told her.

'Yes,' he says, 'life has its cares and duties. But if love sweetens them——'

What words are spoken immediately after these, neither of them ever remembers, except that he tells her he loves her, and that she, in perfect innocence and trustfulness, gives herself up to him ; then, with his arms around her dear form, he kisses her lips for the first time, and they walk slowly homewards to the cottage, with a heaven of happiness in their hearts. The changing colour of the clouds, the cooing of the birds, the worshipful swaying and murmuring of the branches, the fluttering of the leaves, and the other beautiful evidences of a beneficent Creator which proclaim themselves wherever the lovers look or tread, seem to smile upon them, to be made for them. So they wander back to the old country lane, Sassafras leading Bluebell over tangled brushwood, and beneath bending branches which cling to the young girl's hair as though they are loth to lose her.

Later in the evening, Bluebell and Sassafras stood side by side within the shadow of the cottage porch. It was time for them to part, and still they tarried, saying good-night again and again. The moon came out, and shone upon

an orange-tree in the little garden ; eyes of pale golden light gleamed among the branches.

'You must go, you must go,' Bluebell whispered, and still she clung to him.

At length she turned from him with lingering steps.

'Good-night,' she said.

'Good-night, darling ! God protect you ! You are mine now, mine !'

'Yes, I am yours,' she sighed, happily.

He bent his head, and they kissed. Then Bluebell glided swiftly from his embrace, and went into the house, and Sassafras, stepping into the light, saw Dame Endive watching him. She was standing a few paces away, and there was trouble in her eyes. Sassafras was uncertain how to act, but she decided for him.

'Come into the kitchen,' said the old woman, 'and speak low, so that she shall not hear us.'

He followed her into the sanded kitchen, and the old woman laid her crutch aside, and sat down, with face averted from him. When she turned, he saw tears running down her old cheeks.

'This is the first time, dame,' he said ; 'I did not know until to-day that she loved me.'

Dame Endive swayed to and fro in deep distress, and a feeble wail escaped from her.

'O, my son ! my son ! she moaned.

Sassafras knew immediately the cause of her grief, and in the midst of his own happiness his heart grew heavy.

'*He* loved her !' she said, in a

suppressed tone, with jealous fierceness. 'And you knew it—you knew it!'

'Nay, dame,' he answered, with a spasm in his throat, 'I did not know it. Alas! my best and only friend!'

'You are no friend of his,' hissed Dame Endive. 'You are a thief, and you have stolen his happiness! She would have loved him but for you. O, why did you come among us—why did you come? I hate you—I hate you! And if you tell him I said so, I'll die, and curse you with my dying breath!'

'I'll not tell him,' said Sassafras gently and pityingly; 'but do not think so hardly of me. Where is Coltsfoot?'

'He bade me see you before you left. He wishes to speak to you. You will find him at the bottom of the lane.'

'I will go to him. Good-night, dame.'

But she waved him fiercely away, and as he left the room he again heard her moan, 'O, my son! my son!'

Coltsfoot was waiting for Sassafras. The two men regarded each other with earnest looks. Neither strove to hide his thoughts from the other. But Coltsfoot was the more cheerful of the two.

'Ah,' he said, 'my mother has given you more than my simple message.'

'She told me you wished to see me.'

'She told you something more.' Sassafras was silent. 'Well, I would rather she had not spoken; but you must forgive the mother. Old age has its weaknesses. When we are

old men, we shall perhaps babble indiscreetly. And then, dear friend, a mother does not reason.'

'Why was I fated to bring unhappiness into the life of my friend?' cried Sassafras mournfully; 'into the life of the man whom I love and honour more than all others in the world?'

'It is pleasant to me to hear those words. We cannot control circumstances. I have indulged a hope, and it is not to be realised; but, thank God, she does not know.' He put this in the form of a question which Sassafras might be able to answer.

'I think she does not know,' said Sassafras sadly.

'That is well. Tell me. She loves you? Your silence is a sufficient answer. And you—you love her?'

'With all my soul,' replied Sassafras; 'but you have a prior claim—'

'Nay,' interrupted Coltsfoot gently; 'there is but one consideration for us—her happiness. If you were to desert her now, it would break her heart. I have known and watched her from her infancy, and I can be, as I have ever been, a brother to her. Dear Bluebell! dear sister! A purer mind, a sweeter heart, does not exist.' He paused for a moment or two. 'Only in the cause of one whom I look upon as a sacred trust, and through whose innocence and purity human nature becomes ennobled, would I use the words I am now about to speak. But it is unfortunately becoming the fashion of the time to hold many a pure and sacred thing in light esteem. You have won the

love of a good woman; it is a sacred and priceless blessing. I have held you as my friend; shall I hold you so still?'

'Prove me.'

'I will. You have told Bluebell that you love her, and you have received a confession of love from her dear lips. Assure me that you have wooed and won her in full and earnest sincerity of heart and mind—as true man woos and wins

a good woman, whom he will soon take to his heart as his wife, and to whom he will be faithful until death separates them.'

'In that way I have wooed Bluebell—as God is my Judge!'

'Thank God! You are more than my friend—you are my brother. Take my hand, and do not fear to trust me. I can bear my sorrow more easily now. Dear lad! you are worthy of her love!'

XI.

'NOW,' SAID THE KING, STEPPING CLOSE TO THE PRISONER; 'AS MAN TO MAN!'

AT about this period signs of political disturbance were becoming somewhat alarmingly prominent in No-land. There were in the kingdom certain persons who were conscientiously dissatisfied with the form of government under which they lived, and under which they undoubtedly enjoyed many advantages of which the people of other nations were not in possession. These Reformers, as they styled themselves, sprang chiefly from the ranks of the people, and were proud of the association of a few fine minds from the higher classes of society. Notwithstanding their opinions, they were good citizens; they were hard-workers, they led peaceable lives, and reasoned out matters for themselves, according to their lights, in a calm and sensible manner.

But, unfortunately for their cause, it was surrounded by excrescences which gave it an unwholesome appearance. The Quamoclits and Whortleberries of No-land fastened themselves to it, and the con-

sequence was that a thimbleful of common sense was hidden in a gallon of bubble and froth. The one great institution, of course, which was the object of general attack was the institution of Royalty. 'Do away with kings and queens,' said the agitators; 'destroy the false theory that because a man is born into Royalty it is imperative he should be maintained in costly and idle luxuriance by a down-trodden people, and the misery and distress which now overwhelm the nation will disappear, as smoke does before the wind.' Everything seemed to favour the agitators. The value of money had decreased in No-land, and all the necessaries of life were steadily rising in price, so that it took thirty shillings to buy to-day what twenty shillings would have purchased a dozen years ago. The working men, as a natural consequence, asked for higher wages, which in every instance was refused to them. 'Ah,' groaned the Quamoclits and Whor-

leberries, 'crushed, oppressed, ground down again! Poor, suffering masses, when will you obtain your rights?' 'We'll work no longer,' cried the working men, 'until we are fairly paid for our work!' The masters still resisted, and the men left the workshops. Convinced that their demands were fair and reasonable, the hearts of these men turned bitter towards those of the higher orders who employed them, and they were, in a measure, driven into demagoguism. In this way the Quamoclit and Whortleberries gained many recruits. Other strikes in other parts of the country occurred. The agricultural labourers rose, and demanded their rights as men. A disclosure of the circumstances of their lives from their cradles to their graves showed a miserable state of things; they were ignorant, muddle-headed, underpaid, and they lived through all their lives in the worst form of slavery which man can suffer—in a state of helpless pauperism. When the history of No-land comes to be written by a competent and impartial person (if History ever is written in any but a partisan spirit) the condition of the kingdom of No-land, so far as concerns these matters, will be more fully dilated upon; in the mean time the few preceding lines must be accepted as a faithful, if not a satisfactory, index to the state of affairs.

Sassafras, seeking for guidance among his counsellors and for an honest solution of these troubles, was temporised with and lightly put off. He was bidden not to vex himself with these small concerns. Yet they were not entirely

indifferent to the signs of the times. 'Measures must be adopted,' they said to one another, 'to counteract the influence of these small agitators. The sentiment of loyalty must be stirred into active life in the breasts of the people. The King must go about more than he does.'

Sassafras submitted to them; he went about more; his soul was wearied with pageants; and one day, as he sat in his carriage, he was shot at. The bullet missed him; but his heart was sorely wounded. 'How my people must hate me!' he thought, with bitterness. The loyal papers bristled with indignation, and with expressions of love and devotion for his person; they denounced the would-be assassin as a monster, whose name would be infamous through all time; and as usual they went to violent extremes. Sassafras read all these papers, and even insisted upon privately seeing the monster who had attempted his life.

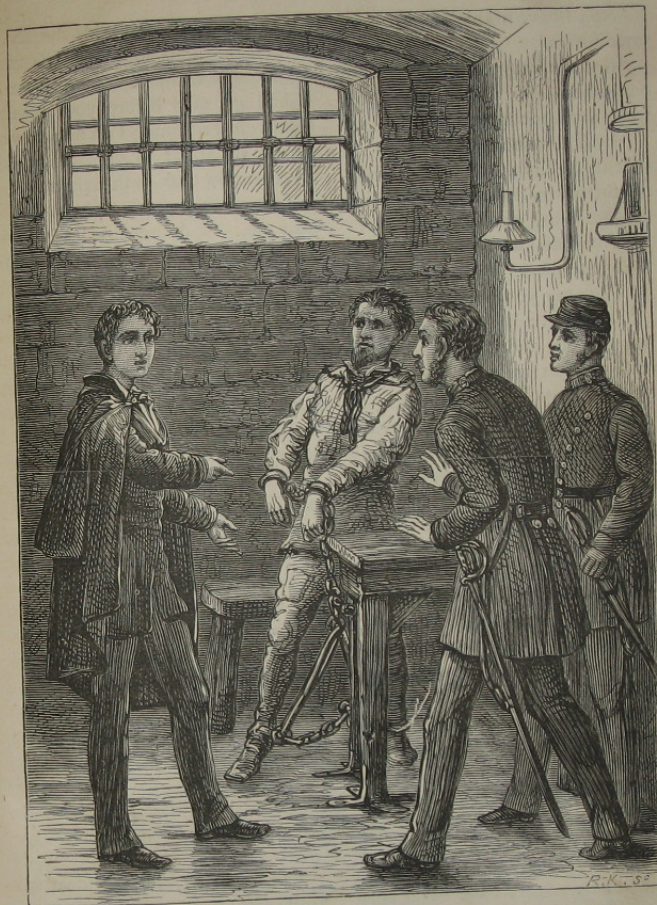
'Your Majesty,' implored Lord Crabtree; 'such a thing was never heard of in history!'

'Is there such a thing as the history of the human heart?' demanded Sassafras bitterly. 'I decline any longer to be guided by precedents of which neither my heart nor my conscience can approve. I will see this man.'

'He is a monster of the deepest dye,' entreated Lord Crabtree, in melodramatic language; 'nay, perhaps, a madman—'

'The more is he to be pitied,' said Sassafras firmly. 'Your remonstrances are useless, my lord. I will see him.'

But king as he was, he would



have been unable to carry out his design had he not promised that he would not disclose to the man that he was the King. This promise he gave—and broke. At the door of the cell he halted, and would not allow a single person to enter with him. When he closed the door, he saw before him, seated by a table which was fastened to the ground,

a man in rags, with a wild and haggard face.

'Do you know me?' asked Sassafras.

'No,' was the reply.

'I am the King.'

The man looked at Sassafras steadily, with a frown on his face.

'I am sorry for you,' he said.

'And not for yourself?'

'No; I have nothing to reproach myself with.'

'Not for attempting the life of one whose face you do not know when you look upon it?'

'I did not shoot at the man; I am shot at the King. If I had succeeded, there would have been a king the less in the world.'

'You hate kings?'

'I hate them.'

'They say you are mad.'

'So I have heard; they might be right—by and by; they are not quite right at present.' He pressed his hand upon his forehead, as though to crush back oppressive thought. 'I am trying to keep my reason; I may lose it soon.'

There was not the slightest wandering in his speech, and his features were firm-set; but it was evident that it was only by the strongest effort of will that he retained his composure. He was a man of forty years of age.

'It is a great honour,' he said, with a scornful smile, 'for me to receive a visit from a king. May I ask for what purpose you come?'

'To appeal to you,' answered Sassafras earnestly; 'to ask you what wrong I have done you that you should attempt my life. I do not know you; I have never seen your face before to-day; your name is strange to me. Tell me in what way I have wronged you.'

There was a pause of a few moments' duration.

'You come to appeal to me?' then said the prisoner. 'You!'

'Yes; as man to man!'

A laugh that was like a groan escaped from the prisoner's lips.

'Look you!' he said, fiercely battling down his agitation; 'if you destroy my consciousness of right, I shall go mad before your eyes. Come closer to me; I do not know what I am about to say, but there are listeners outside that door, and I do not choose that they shall hear me. O, do not fear! I can not harm you. See; they have chained me to the leg of the table, and I cannot move six inches from the seat. It was done an hour before you came, for your protection, as I now can understand. At other times my limbs are free. My hands also are handcuffed; you can approach me with safety.'

Sassafras went to the door of the cell, and threw it open.

'My interview is not yet at an end,' he said to the attendants. 'Where is the gaoler? Remove that man's chains. Unclasp his hands.'

They hesitated to obey him; but he would not be denied. The prisoner's limbs were set free; the door of the cell was closed again, and only they two were within the four walls.

'Now,' said Sassafras, stepping close to the prisoner, 'as man to man!'

The prisoner turned deathly white, and his form trembled; thus he stood before Sassafras, uncertain how to act, uncertain what to say.

'Have you a wife?' asked Sassafras.

The prisoner suppressed a spasmodic cry. 'I had; she is dead, thank God!'

'Children?' asked Sassafras, in a soft and pitying tone.

'I had one—he is dead, thank God!'

'You thank God for those afflictions?'

'Ay, most sincerely! You appeal to me, as man to man. You want me to tell you what wrong you have done me. Be it so. I will tell you. Not long since I was a married man, with a wife whom I loved, and who, I believe, loved me. Two years after our marriage she bore a child. I was a workman on the estate of a certain nobleman whose name would blister my tongue, were I to utter it; if you ask the police—to whom I am well known—they will tell you his name. He holds high rank in your court; his name is mentioned in the papers frequently with credit. What wonder? he is a nobleman. His son came of age; there were great feasts on the estate. My wife and I were present, with every other person who was connected in any way with this nobleman's property. My wife was a pretty woman. I have never seen a prettier. This nobleman's son spoke to me, to her—he did us greater honour; he danced with her in the evening at the ball given to the tenants and the work-people. See you now; no word of sentiment or passion shall pass my lips; I will tell you my story reasonably and coldly. It is fair that I should say that I never cared for kings and queens; but having my work to do, and being fairly happy, I did not enter deeply into the question; it is no business of mine, thought I. Well, then, so it was, until this young cub came of age, and courted my wife by stealth, and turned her

head. At the end of twelve months she left me, secretly; I was not allowed to remain long in doubt as to the man. I went to the father; he received me civilly enough. "What do you want?" he asked, when he had heard my complaint. "Justice," I replied. What other reply could I give? I can see now that it was not a practical demand; but I was blind at that time. I asked him to tell me where I could find his son; he refused. I spoke hotly, and he, not recognising that I had justification for my passion in the wrong his son had inflicted upon me, turned me from his doors. I forget now whether I threatened him; I think I must have done so, for not only was I dismissed from my employment, but from that day I was conscious that I was being watched by the police as a dangerous person. I had saved a little money, and I went to the lawyers for justice. What kind of justice? Well, I could expose this viper, and disgrace him. I was mistaken. Where I spent one pound, the other side spent a hundred. Where I had one lawyer, they had ten. You couldn't see justice through their black gowns. My money was soon spent, and my lawyer said he could not proceed without means. I don't blame the lawyer; I blame the machinery. And yet the lawyers are the manufacturers. The road to justice should be smooth to rich and poor alike. It is not. It is a rocky road, and a rich man can pay for the removal or the placing of obstacles, while a poor man's heart is broken before he walks a dozen yards towards the Shadow

of Justice that stands in the distance. "Fight for me," says this shadow. But the odds should be equal. What occurs when twelve armed men fight one? I wrote to the papers; they took no notice. I wrote to persons in authority; I received no answer. My heart was turning bitter, and I was beginning to starve, for I could obtain no employment. While in this condition I met the young viper, smiling, well dressed, enjoying life. Inflamed—justly inflamed—I struck him, not lightly. I was dragged to the police-court, and imprisoned for three months. I saw the case in the papers afterwards, with the heading, "Savage assault on a young gentleman." I came out of prison, and I made the acquaintance of an old man, a Republican. Still did I think I might obtain justice. He laughed at me, and taunted me with the holes in my pockets. "Be a scoundrel and rich," he said, "and you shall eat of the best. Be a scoundrel and poor, and you shall live on prison fare." I was now a suspected person. The eyes of the police were never off me; yet I did not relax my efforts. I wrote again and again to judges, to law-officers, to noblemen, asking for justice, asking that the man who had ruined me should be punished. Silence was my answer. "Will you never believe," said my friend, "that there is one law for the poor and another for the rich, in No-land?" Then he showed me, in plain print, how the complex machinery of the law was made to defeat justice when two men appeared before the tribunal, one with a full, the other with an empty

purse; he showed me how, after a case appeared to be settled and a decision was given, rules for new motions, new trials, injunctions, arguments, and God knows what all, were set in motion, until the weakest went to the wall! "And, observe," he said, "these obstacles to justice are not open to the poor man, for they are so beautifully framed as to cost much money." He showed me more than this: he showed how the judges in one court upset the decisions of the judges in another; how they all sat together again, and agreed upon a second judgment; and how a judge in a higher court reversed their judgment, and so complicated the case that it would cost thousands of pounds before the matter could be got out of its desperate tangle. But I weary myself with these details. My heart was sore; my soul was sick; my body was enfeebled by want. I was brought to the police-court again for writing what they called threatening letters. The magistrate paid me a compliment. He said, "I am sorry to see a man who can express himself so well conduct himself so disgracefully; but society must be protected—three months." You see what a misfortune it was to me that my parents had given me an education. Can you tell me, up to this point of my career, of what crime I had been guilty? "What will you do now?" asked my friend, at the end of the three months. "There is but one source to appeal to now," I answered; "I will appeal to the head of all; I will appeal to the King." I sat down, and wrote a fair statement of my case, and sent

it to the King of No-land. Silence. I wrote again. Silence. Again, again, again! Silence, silence, silence! I might as well have asked the stars to answer me. The King was as far removed from his people as they are. "Well?" said my friend. I could not answer him; I was almost choked with rage. "So," he said scornfully, "you appealed to the King in the cause of virtue and morality! You thought that in that general cause he would take up your case. You fool! Do you think *he* is a respecter of women?" And then he related incidents in the King's licentious life, which proved to me how vain it was for me to appeal for justice there. My friend worked upon this theme until, looking upon the King as the head of these evils, I grew to hate him with a deep unquenchable hate. My child died literally of starvation. I thanked the King for it. My wife died. I thanked the King for it. Want was my portion; sleep deserted me. I thanked the King for it. "Shall I die," I asked of myself, "and end my pain?" Yes, I decided that I would. But I would first rid the world of a monster, and avenge myself. I made the attempt, and failed; I am more than satisfied now to say Good-bye to the world and its monstrous cruelties. And if there be a Judgment Seat in the Hereafter, I will appear before it, and tell my story there.

He ceased, and silence reigned for many moments; the hearts of

both these men were sorely agitated—one with passion and despair, the other with grief and commiseration.

'The stories you heard about me are false,' said Sassafras, very sadly, when he was able to control his emotion; 'I never saw one of your letters. I pity you from my heart.'

The man turned his face doggedly to the wall, and rested his head upon his arm. Sassafras waited for the man to speak, but he waited in vain. He continued then, scarce knowing what he said, but his words were very gentle, and were such as one might have spoken to a brother. Still the man remained obdurate, and hid his face.

'Can I do nothing for you?' asked Sassafras.

'You can,' then replied the man, turning his haggard face to the King; 'two things.'

'Tell me what they are.'

'You will do them?'

'If it is in my power.'

'It is in your power. First—let the judges condemn me to instant death. I want to die. Let no false clemency be shown to me, and do not allow me in my condition to be condemned to a worse torture than death—to a life-imprisonment, where I may eat my heart away. I am not mad—I am sane as you or they are. Second—remove yourself from my presence, and mock me no longer with your pitying words. They come too late!'

XII.

THE KING NARRATES TO THE COURT PARASITES THE PARABLE OF THE TREES.

AFTER this interview, so deep a melancholy took possession of Sasafra as to augur the most serious results if measures were not adopted to counteract it. He wandered about the palace, pale, dejected, and suffering. He was at war with himself and the world. His counsellors cudgelled their brains to provide amusement for him which would divert his mind from melancholy, but all their efforts to woo him to cheerfulness were vainly made. At this time they themselves began to be a little disturbed by the proceedings of the Quamoclit and Whortleberries, and they decided that there was but one means by which this slight disaffection might be overcome and the personal condition of their sovereign improved: the King *must* marry. The rejoicings attendant upon such an occasion would be certain to restore the fading loyalty of the people. They made a list of all the available foreign princesses. Princess This, Princess That, Princess T'other. They selected one in every way fit, according to their opinion, and called a private Cabinet Council, at which the King was present, and at which the subject was brought forward. They used the most powerful arguments in their endeavour to prevail upon him; they implored him to consider that an alliance with the Princess they had decided upon would strengthen his throne, and would not only contribute to his happiness, but would be a death-blow to the

agitators who were bringing dissension into the kingdom. On mention of these agitators, the King spoke, for the first time, with animation.

'It is fitting that this matter should be noticed,' he said; 'it is a serious one.'

'Nay, nay, a trifle,' observed one and another, not wishing to attach too much importance to it.

He joined issue with them at once, to their great annoyance.

'I dissent entirely from the estimate you form of these agitations. I dissent entirely from the view you take of the result of an alliance with the Princess you mention—whom I believe to be a good and virtuous lady. Even if my own personal happiness were not consulted in the proposed alliance—'

'But it is, your Majesty,' they protested; 'it is. Cannot you see it?'

'No, I cannot see it,' he continued, in a steady tone. 'Even, as I said, if my own personal happiness were not consulted in this proposed alliance, and I was willing to sacrifice it—which, let me tell you plainly, I am not, my lords (there is a certain matter, of which you are in ignorance, in which my honour is concerned)—even then my marriage with this lady would not cast oil upon these troubled waters. Whether you are aware of it or not, I have lately interested myself in looking into certain matters which have much disturbed me. There are, in my opinion, grievances existing in No-land which

should not be left to remedy themselves in the course of time, but which claim—imperatively claim—to be examined and judged at once upon their own grounds. The best thing to be done is for me to hear in person what these Quamoclit and Whortleberries have to say.'

Thereupon ensued such a clamour as was never before heard in the Cabinet. They were aghast at the suggestion. They looked at each other with pale and inflamed faces, according to their temperaments. What! The King, in his sacred person—who was to the people a symbol of right and might and power and glory—to so far forget his position as to receive these common agitators! All precedent would be outraged by such a proceeding. The King interrupted them here.

'Precedent! precedent! precedent!' he cried. 'And are we to be for ever governed by those we have, and never make a new one out of our enlarged knowledge and advancing civilisation? Are we for ever to be turned from the contemplation of a course which we conceive to be right, because it has never been trodden before?'

They adopted another line of defence. They said that the proceedings of the Quamoclit and Whortleberries were not worthy of high notice; that the members of their societies and associations were of the very lowest class.

'But tell me,' said the King, 'are not four-fifths of my people of the lowest class?'

They were compelled to admit that this was so.

'Well, then,' he continued, 'who

should be legislated for—the many or the few?'

Still they insisted that the persons spoken of belonged to the rabble, whom it would be folly to recognise.

'But,' he demanded, 'what if they force themselves upon your recognition?'

'They have not forced themselves upon ours,' they replied loftily.

Upon which he related to them what he termed The Parable of the Trees.

'In a fine and fertile tract of land, a number of tall trees stood with their heads raised constantly to the skies. At their feet languished an infinite variety of small flowers and shrubs, whose numbers, in comparison with the trees, were as ten thousand to one. Without any thought of their humbler brethren, these lofty trees grew and grew, and spread their branches wider and wider, until, in course of time, they absorbed all the light and air which it was in the power of nature to bestow. "Look down upon our condition," cried the smaller flowers, "and keep yourselves within bounds, so that we may enjoy a fair share of the sweet light and fresh breezes, which are as necessary to our well-being as to yours." But the trees, whose pride had lifted them so high, were now almost out of hearing of the humbler residents of the wood, and as they never condescended to cast their eyes downwards, they were in ignorance of the sad condition of the lower growth; and even when, in consequence of the increasing clamour of the multitude for light

and air, the complaints reached their ears, they lifted their heads still higher to the skies. The multitude increased in strength, if not in beauty, and with the necessity of living strong upon them, wound themselves, from very force of circumstances, round about the roots of the trees, and made such inroads into the earth as to sap the foundations of their powerful brethren—for they were all members of one family. "Give us room," they continued to cry; "give us opportunity; give us at least fair play." Still the trees turned a deaf ear, and scornfully continued their way, with no fear for their own safety. They thought that what had been, always would be. But one day a great storm burst over their heads, and they had become so weakened by the proceedings of the multitude, and their own pride, that they had not strength to withstand it. They tottered and fell, crushing to death thousands of their humbler brethren in their fall. But they fell, never to rise again.

Not one of the counsellors could see the slightest application in this parable, to which nevertheless they were bound to listen with respect. They renewed their solicitations; they begged the King to reconsider his decision. The harder they begged, the more obdurate he became. He rose and said, "My lords, in three days from this I shall receive the Quamoclots and Whortleberries, and shall listen to what they have to say."

Then he left them. All the foolish ones began to talk at once; the more sensible were silent, and

drummed on the table with their fingers in great perplexity.

'He is in earnest; he means it,' said one.

'I am afraid,' said another, in a cautious whisper, tapping his forehead, 'that all is not right here.'

'Hush, hush, my lords!' remonstrated Lord Crabtree; 'your lordships have overlooked something. His Majesty, when speaking of his marriage, said that his happiness was not consulted in this proposed alliance; and then he uttered these remarkable words: "There is a certain matter of which you are in ignorance in which my honour is concerned." Now what do these words portend? What, my lords, but that there is a lady in the case?'

They smiled; except to the mind of Lord Crabtree this was not a serious matter. 'O, that is easily arranged,' they said to one another. A Prelate, high in the Church, was present; and he, by his silence, acquiesced in the easy view they took of the matter. Not a word had he to say in opposition.

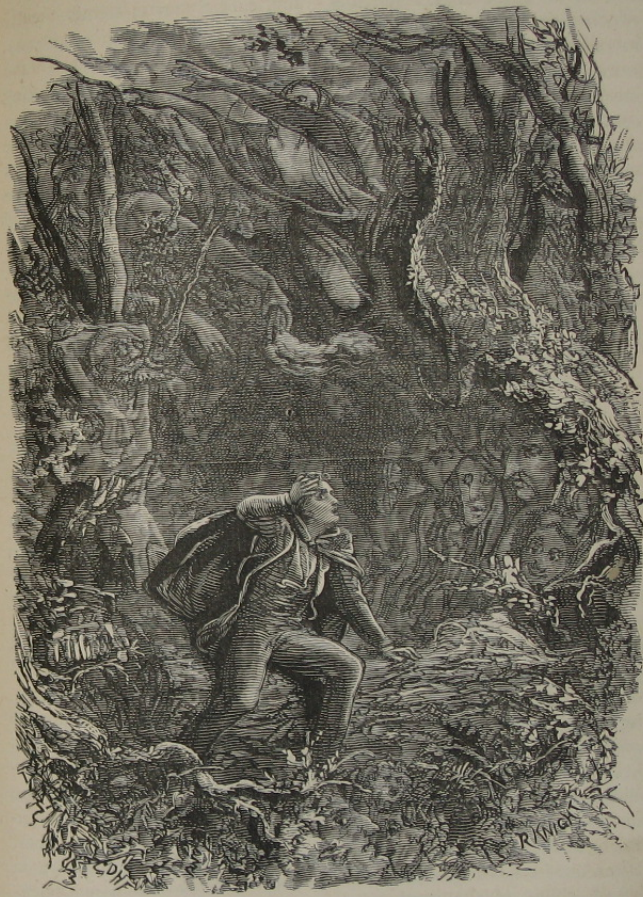
'But,' said Lord Crabtree, 'suppose his Majesty contemplates anything serious.'

'Nonsense, nonsense,' they exclaimed; 'such a thing is impossible—unheard of.'

'Still,' continued Lord Crabtree, 'if your lordships will empower me to speak to his Majesty upon the subject—'

'Yes, yes; speak to him,' they said, before they broke up, 'and show him how easily these matters can be settled both to his and the lady's satisfaction.'

Lord Crabtree waited upon his Majesty, and explained that he had



been commissioned to speak with reference to a few words that had dropped from his Majesty's lips. He was not allowed, however, to proceed far.

'I have heard your views on this subject before to-day,' said Sassafras; 'they are unchanged, I presume.'

'They are the views of the whole body of your counsellors, your Majesty,' replied Lord Crabtree.

'Let me put a case to you,' said Sassafras, 'a case that occurs to my mind just now. Say that a king—any king; select an imaginary one, if it pleases you—loved a lady far below him in position, but far above

him in all those higher qualities which religion teaches us are of more precious value than wealth or worldly station. Say that she was intelligent, modest, truthful, innocent, and pure; say that in her unsullied breast resided those qualities of perfect goodness which bring human nature as near as it can be brought to the divine attribute. Say that she loved this king, and that he loved her. Could he marry her?"

"Only in one way, your Majesty," replied Lord Crabtree.

"There is but one way of marry-

ing," said Sassafras sternly, "and I ask you whether in this right way, sanctioned by God and by the words of His priests, this king could marry this woman?"

"I am glad," said Lord Crabtree tremulously and gravely, "that your Majesty has put before me only a supposititious case. Indeed, it could not be otherwise."

"Answer me plainly, my lord."

"Such a marriage would be distinctly impossible, your Majesty."

"That is enough, my lord; I asked but for information. I have nothing more to say."

XIII.

OLD HUMANITY.

On the appointed day the representatives of the Quamoelits and Whortleberries had audience of the King. With a rare exercise of wisdom, they had elected as their spokesman one of the most intelligent and consistent of the Reformers. At the important meeting at which this man was chosen, some noisy partisans put forward their claims for election to the office. Bugloss, a frothy and insincere demagogue, was especially violent in the representation of his claims, but he was set aside by the shrewd chiefs of the party, who knew what kind of stake they were playing for. The spokesman upon whom their votes fell would have commanded respect in any assembly. He was an old man, who in his younger days had become a staunch Republican from conviction—not the conviction that is inspired by the infliction of a per-

sonal injury or a personal injustice, but that which emanates from a large and comprehensive view of humanity. Born among the people, and living among them, he had made himself intimately acquainted with the condition of their lives, with their struggles, their limited desires, their modest aspirations. He was conversant with their virtues and their vices, and in the views he expressed of these extremes he was almost a philosopher. Every action of his life spoke in his favour; he was a conscientious workman, a temperate liver, and had never been known to lie or to commit a dishonest action. He was fixed in his belief that Royalty was a bad institution, and that its existence gave birth to pernicious personal ambition, in the carrying out of which the lower classes of people were made to suffer. He had been asked on

many occasions to go publicly among the people, and advocate his views, but he had consistently refused. "When the right time comes," he said, "better men than I will rise to lead you." But even his calm temperament had been stirred by the recent agitations, and when he was waited upon by a deputation, and was told that the choice of the people had fallen upon him as their spokesman, he allowed himself to be prevailed upon, and consented to accompany the deputation in that capacity. Old Humanity was the name by which he was generally known among the lower classes.

To the palace came this old man, in his working clothes, accompanied by a mixed assembly, chiefly composed of Quamoelits and Whortleberries. Many of the men were hot and dusty, having carried heavy banners through the streets. Outside the palace a huge concourse of people was gathered, waiting to hear the result of the interview. They were perfectly orderly and peaceful.

Sassafras received the deputation in the great hall of the palace; behind him stood his counsellors, among whom was Lord Crabtree, fidgety, and fretful, and anxious. The thoughtful melancholy face of the King evidently surprised Old Humanity, as he stepped forward; but he set aside all sentiment, and proceeded steadily with the task before him.

This man was a born orator, and the theme on which he spoke was one in which the whole strength of his heart and mind was enlisted. He had come well armed with facts

and with an army of injustices which he said would take a week to narrate. He selected the strongest instances, and laid them before the King. By means of contrast he drew powerful and startling pictures. Not new ones; old as the hills almost were they, but they were faithful transcriptions. Here, the very extreme of physical want and destitution; there, the very extreme of undeserved luxury and ease. Ignorance, crime, and squalor on the one side; intellectual wealth and material splendour on the other. He even went so far, in his preliminary remarks, as to show how one man was forced to earn damnation, while his brother rode in his carriage to salvation. He insisted that, as it was no fault or merit of the child whether he was born in St. Giles or St. James, it was the imperative duty of the State to act in some part as the father instead of the gaoler of the unfortunate; he argued that, if this were done wisely and judiciously, there would in time be no such place as St. Giles; and he said that the difference between classes was so appallingly wide as to be a crime in the eyes of God and humanity. He illustrated every step of his argument; from his mind he drew logic—from his heart he drew pity. He quoted largely from Christ and from religious teachings. He had brought with him extracts from the sermons of living divines, and he placed practice side by side with precept. Here are such and such utterances, he said; here are such and such facts; and he asked the King to reconcile them. He spoke of the struggles of great num-

bers of the labouring classes, which every now and then forced themselves to the surface; he gave a true history of the personal condition of the agricultural labourers and of the miserable condition of their lives; he drew a painful picture of children brought up in the brickyards and the gutters, and who were compelled to suck in degradation with their mothers' milk; he declared that there never was a period in the world's history in which the lust for money and power was producing such baneful effects as at present; and after travelling over much ground which there is not space here to touch upon, he came to his peroration, in which he stated his honest conviction that the monarchical institution had proved itself to be utterly inadequate to remedy these evils.

This lame and inadequate description of his speech, which occupied an hour in its delivery, must be accepted; but no words could do justice to the man's eloquence and fire and sincerity. When he concluded, murmurs of delighted approval broke out among the auditors in the body of the hall; then there was silence for many moments, during which all eyes were turned towards the King. His face was hidden from them, and when he raised it, something like a clear light shone in his eyes.

'I have listened to you patiently,' he said, in a low sad tone, 'and you have told me many things of which I was ignorant. I require time for self-communion; come tomorrow to the palace, at this hour, and you shall receive my reply.'

He bowed to them, and they

departed. Then without a word to his councillors, who crowded anxiously about him, he waved them aside, and retired to his private apartment.

* * * *

Had any person been present in the rear of the King's lodge at about ten o'clock that night, he might have seen a man emerge from the door. The night was dark, and the man stood for a little while, with the handle of the door in his hand, peering into the darkness. Then he locked the door, and threw the key among the distant trees. He was commonly dressed, and was evidently anxious not to be observed. He turned towards the palace, and waved a farewell to it, and with a strange expression on his face, and a sigh which seemed to lift a heavy weight from his heart, and yet had in it a sound of pain and weariness, he plunged into the wood, and crept stealthily away.

* * * *

On the following day, at the time set down by the King, the Quamocits and Whortleberries, headed by Old Humanity, made their way to the palace. Their numbers were more numerous than on the previous occasion. There could not have been fewer than a hundred thousand persons congregated in the open spaces round about the palace. The deputation was received by Lord Crabtree and his fellows. In Lord Crabtree's hand was a sealed letter. Addressing Old Humanity, the courtier said,

'I have received a communication from his most gracious Majesty this morning, in which he desires me to hand you this let-

ter as his answer. His Majesty says that you are to open the letter and read it aloud here. Perhaps it will be as well—perhaps it will be as well.'

Old Humanity took the letter from Lord Crabtree's hand. From where he was standing many of the deputation could not see him.

'Stand upon the dais,' they shouted, 'so that we can all see and hear.'

Lord Crabtree placed himself in Old Humanity's way.

'It cannot be permitted,' he said; 'it cannot be permitted. This is royal ground.'

Old Humanity, pushing steadily forward, replied,

'The King says that I am to read the contents aloud to all the people. This is the only elevation from which I can obey the King's command.'

Lord Crabtree was compelled to give way, and Old Humanity stood in the place which the King had occupied the previous day. He opened the letter, and every person in the vast hall inclined his head to hear what the King had written. The court parasites, of whom a larger number were now present, were as anxious as the people.

'This is what King Sassafras writes,' cried Old Humanity, in a ringing tone:

'I have pondered seriously over the words you, as representative of the people, have addressed to me, and I recognise the justice of your complaints. I believe that your grievances are not imaginary, but that they really exist, and call for instant remedy.

What personal feeling influences me in the decision I have come to it is not necessary here to state; but my conscience tells me that if I, as King, am responsible for one thousandth part of the miseries and injustices which you have placed before me with so much power and eloquence, I should not, now that I am made acquainted with them, deserve to live another hour if in my own person I continued to perpetuate them. You tell me that if the people of No-land were to be governed by themselves, these evils would soon be remedied, and justice would be done. In God's name, let justice be done—but let there be no violence, no bloodshed. Into the people's hands I resign my crown, and what power and authority they suppose I have possessed. I enjoin the nobles of my court to do nothing to obstruct my wish—if they do, I can at any moment return and punish them for their disobedience. It will be useless seeking for me; they will not find me. From this day the people of No-land are to be governed by the people. Most cheerfully do I resign my office, and most humbly do I pray for a realisation of your noble aspirations.

'SASSAFRAS.'

After the wonderment which the reading of this strange document produced had subsided, the people broke into a great roar of delight. Lord Crabtree, white and trembling, tottered out of the palace, and hid himself. Old Humanity was carried to the window, from the balcony of which he re-read in his most piercing tones the King's

letter. The enthusiasm was wild and unbounded. The Quamoclit and Whortleberries danced and shouted and threw up their caps.

The only person upon whose face there was an expression of uncertainty and perplexity was the face of Old Humanity.

XIV.

THE FLIGHT FROM THE PALACE.

It was said afterwards that for a hundred years such a storm had not been experienced in No-land as that which broke over the country on the night of the abdication of the King. The wild winds shrieked through the forests, uprooting the trees, and swaying them as though they were blades of grass; the rain came down with the force of a deluge, and rivers rushed through the streets; the thunder shook strong buildings to their foundations, and many persons were struck dead by lightning. The pious wept and prayed, believing that the last day had come; the souls of men whose days had been evilly spent fainted within them, and the sinners trembled and repented and made vows.

While Iris, sitting up in her lowly cottage, listened to the wind, and prayed that no harm would befall her friends. Her sisters, Lucerne and Daisy, were sound asleep, and our Iris was working after midnight by the light of one candle, putting a stitch here and a stitch there in their humble clothing. A tender little mother was our small maiden, working with cheerfulness and patience and love.

The storm had overtaken Sassafras in the woods. His own fault, chiefly, that he was there when it

broke, for he had dallied with the time. He had carefully planned all the details of his flight, but what was to follow he had left to chance. Only when he had thrown away the key of his private lodge, and had plunged into the forest, did he begin to think of what should be his next steps. To go to Bluebell's cottage at such a time of the night was impossible; and when his thoughts reverted to Coltsfoot as a refuge, he was dismayed by the reflection that his strange and unexpected appearance, taken in conjunction with the flight of the King, might engender suspicions in Coltsfoot's mind. It was a wild and improbable contingency to fear, but conscience magnified it, and made it reasonable and probable to the thinker. Well did he know that, in such an event, all hope of a happy and peaceful life with the beloved of his heart would be utterly and completely destroyed. The risk, therefore, was too great to run. Where should he hide? Where should he find a refuge?

He sat himself down to think, but his mind was in a whirl, and he wearily raised his hand to his aching head. He was tired and faint and hungry; scarcely an ounce of food had passed his lips

that day; he had been too overwrought and excited to give a thought to material things. His nerves had been strung to a dangerous tension during the last few weeks, and unconsciously he had overtaxed his strength, physically and mentally. This had not made itself apparent during the fever of events through which he had passed; but now that he had, as it were, flung his past life behind him, nevermore, as he vowed and resolved, to be resumed, now that he was relieved of the exquisite torture which his heart and soul had suffered for so long a time, his strength gave way. A sudden weakness fell upon him; an aching weariness oppressed him. He found himself listening, with listless curiosity, to the sounds in the air which portended the approach of the storm. A vacant smile came to his lips as he heard the first low growling of the thunder. The trees sighed and bent; he heard the sighs, and he connected the sounds with such thoughts as were uppermost in his mind, and singing them into words, and singing them in a vacant manner, and yet in rhythm with the murmur of the trees. He saw them bend, and they assumed the forms of the persons with whom he had come in contact—of the unfortunate man who had attempted his life—of court parasites bowing and bending before him—of Old Humanity—of a vast concourse of people surging this way and that.

Iris crept softly to the bed where Lucerne and Daisy were sleeping, and kissed them both, the tenderest caress being given to Daisy, who,

as the youngest, most needed her care. A perfect little Daisy indeed, bright, fresh, and smiling in her sleep. Her body was clean, her soul was pure; sweet as the breath of morning was the breath from her lips. Her little fingers closed upon Iris's hand as this guardian angel of the lowly dwelling leant over her and caressed her—closed and clasped with eloquent affection. With a bright smile upon her dear and patient face, the little woman tenderly placed Daisy's arm beneath the clothes, and tucked up both the children to the very creases of their necks, so that not a gap was left for the cold air to creep through. Then she went back to her work, and resumed her stitching.

The first distinct peal of thunder broke over the woods. Sassafras laughed aloud. He had removed his cap from his fevered head. The first few heavy drops of rain fell. He raised his hand to his forehead, and felt the raindrops, wonderingly. A flash of lightning darted into the earth, and in the sudden blaze of light he saw strange faces appear and disappear, and then a white form which his fancy imaged into Bluebell. He started to his feet, and strove to trace the sequence of events which had led him into these dark woods, into this mental chaos. Memory returned to him gradually, and then he knew, by the burning of his flesh, by the trembling of his limbs, by the dreadful sickness in his heart, that he was ill and weak, and that it behoved him to find a shelter. Whither should he direct his steps?

His mind wandered again. Dark

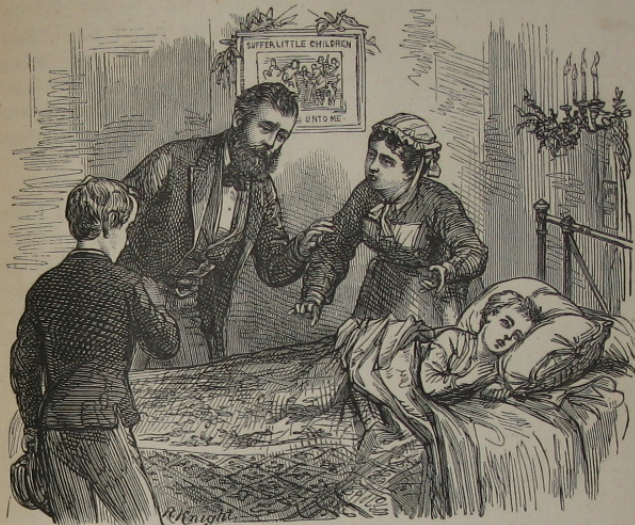
shapes and forms melted into one another, melted suddenly into the picture of a churchyard, with three small fiddlers playing over a grave. This picture came to him in another vivid flash of lightning; and, impelled partly by delirium, partly by reason, which was struggling vainly to regain its sway, he walked mechanically towards the house in which his young friends lived. The rain beat down upon him; he did not know that he had dropped his cap, and he raised his hand and placed it, as he thought, upon his still uncovered head; the lightning played about him; the thunder whirled in his mind. Still he struggled on, directing his steps aright. But his progress was slow; he had to feel his way, and it is doubtful whether he would not have been compelled to give up the attempt in despair had he been quite sensible and responsibly conscious.

Iris, having completed her work, put away her needle and thread, and carefully folding up the clothes, placed them aside. Then she undressed, and knelt to her prayers, and crept into bed next to Daisy, who in her sleep nestled close to her sister-mother. The cottage was in darkness. 'How cold it must be outside,' thought Iris, 'and how nice and warm here! I hope it will be fine to-morrow.' The last thought that dwelt in her mind, before she fell asleep, was the comfortable one that the water-butts would be quite filled in the morning.

The wind shrieked and moaned without, now lashed into agony, now exhausted by pain. It bore

presently upon its wings sighs and moans of human suffering. A lull in the storm took place. Iris was not, like her sisters, a sound and deep sleeper; she had too many cares. Generally in the middle of night she awoke, and thought of things, reckoning up mentally how much money they had, and scheming and planning. She awoke on this night, and as she lay thinking, a groan fell upon her ears—fell heedlessly and without meaning at first, for she was not fully conscious; but when it was repeated, she sat up in bed quickly, and listened, not sure even then that it was not a trick of her fancy. Again she heard the sound of suffering. What should she do? The question was asked and answered in a breath. Our little maid did not know what fear was; she knew what suffering was, for she had nursed her mother through a long sickness; she had been acquainted with it from her earliest years. Up she rose bravely, and went to the door. She heard the groans plainly now, and unconnected words in which her own name, and the names of Daisy and Lucerne, occurred. She lit the candle, and after assuring herself that Daisy and Lucerne were still sleeping, she opened the street-door softly.

'Who is there?' she asked. A moan answered her. The wind rushed in, and extinguished the light. Iris shivered with cold. Her warm bare feet were chilled when she advanced upon the doorstep. She stretched out her hand, and felt about in the darkness. It came to a human face, and a hot hand strove to grasp hers feebly.



'Who is it?' asked the little maid, with a palpitating heart. 'Who are you?'

In the unintelligible words that followed she recognised the voice of the friend they all loved so well, and with a man's strength she helped the sufferer into the house, he crawling after her, animated only by the instinct that to lie where he had fallen was certain death. She closed the street-door when he was safely inside, and re-lit the candle. Then she saw that it was indeed her friend, and with compassionate cries she knelt by his side, and raised his head upon her lap. He was wet to the skin, and the water was oozing away all around him. She questioned him, and wild words answered her; but he opened his eyes, and for a moment they rested tenderly upon her face; then he relapsed into

delirium. How she gained the wisdom that guided her actions Heaven only knows; but she saw that he was terribly ill, and that not a moment was to be lost. At this moment Lucerne awoke, and called out to know what was the matter. Iris bade her get up immediately, and Lucerne obeyed her. When she came to the side of Sassafraz, and recognised him, she began to cry.

'You mustn't cry, you mustn't cry!' exclaimed Iris, in an agitated tone. 'Light the fire, quick! Put the kettle on. He is very ill, and we must nurse him.'

All this time her hands were busy removing his wet clothes; happily for her and for himself a lucid interval came to him.

'Do you know me? do you know me?' inquired Iris, almost despairing, for she was not strong enough

to perform the duties required of her.

'Yes, you are Iris, and that is Lucerne there, lighting the fire. Dear children! dear children!'

'Then quick! undress yourself and get into bed.'

Swiftly she took Daisy in her arms, out of the warm bed in which they had all been lying, and with their clothes she made a nest for the little one before the fire, and placed her comfortably there. Daisy did not awake; nothing disturbed that little creature in the night. By that time Sassafras was in the warm bed, and presently Iris was by his side with a cup of hot tea, which he drank gratefully. He was still lucid. Indeed, he kept himself so by a strong effort of will; he had something to say before he would allow the fever to master him again; he beat the delirium away fiercely.

'Bend your head,' he whispered to Iris. 'Do you love me?'

'O yes, yes!'

'I have been overtaken by misfortune; I am afraid I am going to be ill. Stop a moment—stop a moment!' (This with a wild motion of his hands: the words were addressed to himself, and were intended to check the wave of fever that he felt to be coming upon him.) 'If you love me, you must promise me to nurse me yourself, and not go to Coltsfoot or Bluebell. I exact the promise. Give it to me—for God's sake give it to me!'

'I do—I do!' cried Iris, with the tears running down her face.

'God will reward you; I cannot. Dear child, dear child! An angel dwells in your breast. But listen still. You are not to go to those

dear ones I have named until the fever is over that I feel coming upon me. And what strange words I may utter you will not repeat. Swear to me—no, promise, that is enough—that you will not tell them what I say.'

'Yes, yes; I promise.'

'Ah me! ah me! Did I not tell you that I have been overtaken by a great misfortune? I shall say strange things—I have had strange fancies. But they will be over soon. The world is not all bad. There is goodness in it; there is sweetness in it. There are stars of peace and love in it. Come!'

He stretched out his arms, and rose in bed; the gentle hand of Iris upon his breast was sufficient to compose him, and he sank back again.

'One more word,' he said, grasping consciousness, as it were, before it entirely escaped him; 'if I am rebellious, and give you trouble, whisper to me the name of Bluebell. Peace dwells with her.'

These were the last rational words he uttered for three weeks, during which time Iris nursed him with tender care. But she would have found it far more difficult than she did to be faithful to the trust reposed in her, and which she accepted, had it not been that Coltsfoot found so much to do in consequence of the excitement into which the country was thrown by the abdication of the King, that every moment of his time was occupied. His task was to throw oil upon the troubled waters among the poor whom he knew, and to prevent them from becoming violent in the extravagance of their agitation at the new state of things

which was to be such a blessing to them. During these three weeks, Coltsfoot saw Iris on three or four occasions, when she contrived to meet him always in the streets, and he was satisfied by her words that all was going on well with her and her sisters. The little maid played a cunning part, and played it well. She obtained medicines from Colts-

foot, leading him to believe that they were for a poor person whom she visited; and by this means and her own unwearied care she nursed Sassafras into convalescence.

'I can never repay you, dear child,' he said, as he lay upon the bed, a shadow of his former self. 'Go now to Coltsfoot and Bluebell, and tell them I am here.'

XV.

THROUGHOUT THREE CHANGES OF THE SEASONS.

As in a panorama scenes of places far distant from one another pass before our eyes within a few minutes—space and time being defied, as it were, and conquered by the artists' brush—so, in some part after the same fashion, shall certain pictures be given while the seasons run their course in nature's wondrous scheme.

A little village church shines out in the clear light of morning. The snow is on the ground; the air is sweet, and the heavens are bright. Round about the door are grouped thirty or forty poor women and children, dressed in their best; some carry bunches of winter flowers in their hands. To this village church come Bluebell and Sassafras, to plight their troth according to God's holy ordinance: Coltsfoot accompanies them, and Robin; and Iris and Lucerne and Daisy. Affectionate hands hold out the flowers to the bride and bridegroom; affectionate looks greet them whichever way they turn. With heads reverently bent they listen to the words of the priest; love is in their hearts, solemn thoughts are in their minds. Sas-

safra mentally thanks God for the new life which this day begins for him; and the beautiful face of the bride grows still more beautiful as she plights her troth. It is near Christmas time, and the good season's gladness is reflected in the faces of those who throng the little church. 'May it be always Christmas with you, my child,' says Coltsfoot to Bluebell, as he kisses her in a fatherly way. He turns to Sassafras, and grasps his hand with faithful grasp. Then, with a smile on his lips, he leaves them, saying that he will be with them at the cottage in an hour.

How does he spend this hour? Alone, he stands in the cold white woods. He knows that this day has set the seal upon all his hopes of home and domestic love. No loving woman shall ever nestle in his arms, and call him Husband. No child shall ever cling to his knees, and call him Father. Waves of grief pass over his soul; sighs issue from his aching breast; tears stain his face; a wintry smile dwells upon his lips. Suddenly the sun shines out; its warm rays rest upon a branch from which cold

icicles hang, which presently dissolve, and drop in diamond tears one by one to earth. 'Yes,' he murmurs, as if in answer to this sign; 'because the fruition of love is denied to me, shall I allow my heart to be frozen? Dear sister! dear brother!' He prays for strength, and it comes to him. 'Be comforted,' seems to be written in the air, in the snow-lined trees, in the clear heavens. The brave faithful man stands still for a few moments, with his earnest face turned upwards to the skies. Then he takes a handful of snow, and with it washes the traces of tears from his eyes. When he rejoins Bluebell and Sassafras, they see the same sweet smile upon his lips as was there when he left them by the village church.

It is spring. Two men are working in the woods side by side. The sound of their axes rings through the air. A tree quivers, totters, falls. The workmen pause to wipe their brows. 'You're getting on,' says Ragged Robin approvingly. Sassafras smiles. 'But I shall never be as good a workman as you,' he says. 'Tain't to be expected,' remarks Robin complacently; but his complacent look changes soon to one of discontent. 'What now, Robin?' asks Sassafras. 'Tis a shame it is,' answers Robin; 'things ain't right.' 'Two shillings a week more, eh, Robin?' exclaims Sassafras, with a sly look of merriment. 'That's so,' says Robin; 'that's all that's wanted.' 'I wonder,' says Sassafras, swinging his axe, 'whether that nut will ever be cracked?' 'I'd crack it,' grumbles Robin, 'if I had it between my teeth!'

It is summer, and Coltsfoot and Sassafras stand by a small patch of land on which the corn is ripening. The plot is a very small one, and they have acquired it by industry; they have cultivated it with their own hands. 'There will be a good crop,' says Sassafras; 'we shall have flour enough for the year.'

It is the evening of the same day. A hundred men, women, and children are trooping to Coltsfoot's school-house. His pupils have so increased in numbers that he has been compelled to call in the aid of Sassafras. Bluebell also assists them occasionally, when she can be spared from her household duties. Some of the pupils are gray-haired men, who are now for the first time mastering their *a b c*. Iris, Lucerne, and Daisy are regular attendants. The pupils learn good lessons in addition to the regular routine of tasks. How can it be otherwise, with such a teacher as Coltsfoot to guide them? By the mere force of example he renders them fitter for life's duties and for the life to come. Within the scope of his influence—which is necessarily very limited, but he does more than one man's good work—there are no gin-palaces, with garish light and vicious glitter, to poison and mislead. He woos the weak and ignorant to a better spending of their leisure hours. Wise, tolerant, merciful yet just, the lessons they learn from him clear the clouds from their minds, and make their souls and bodies clean and wholesome. Many and many a home has he made bright and happy.

'And a little to spare,' adds Coltsfoot. Together they walk to the little cottage, which is again bright with colour. Within the honeysuckle porch sits Bluebell, working, and watching for the approach of her husband and friend. They come. She runs to meet them. A heaven of happiness is in the heart of Sassafras as he walks towards their home with his arm around her waist, and he murmurs gratefully, 'Now do I know what sweetness there is in life.' 'What is that you are whispering?' asks Bluebell. 'That I am the happiest man in No-land, my darling,' he replies. 'Then I think,' she says, with that indescribably tender movement which in such moments a woman makes towards the man she loves, 'that I must be the happiest woman.'

The brown tints of autumn are coming into the leaves as all these humble friends whom I have grown to love stand around a grave. Dame Endive is dead. To the last she never forgave Sassafras for robbing her son of Bluebell, and if there had been room for a thorn in the happy cottage, she would have planted it. But there was no room. Her son and her friends would not allow it to grow. And now she is removed from them, and there is one soul the less in the happy nest. But another will soon be added to it—a flower which will bring a new and heaven-born joy to the hearts of Bluebell and Sassafras.

It is winter again; and Christmas-day dawns upon them. The church bells ring blithely in the

air, and Sassafras and his friends walk to church. 'We are seven,' says Coltsfoot as he looks around, for Robin, and Iris, and her sisters are of the party, making up the number. They sit in the rear of the building. The preacher is a rough earnest man, and his unstudied words come from a deep well of earnestness. Occasionally his similes are startling in their truthful application. They are like rays of sunlight shining on dark places, where what is hidden or has been hidden is suddenly made clear to the understanding. He is emphatically a preacher of the gospel of the poor, and he sets forth the old, old lessons, more needed now than at any other time in the world's history. His text is, 'Love one another.' In beautiful and simple language he describes the duty which man owes to man, and sets before his hearers so clear a view of the right course of life—not only right, but wise, because of the sweetness there is in it—that the dullest among them can comprehend. 'Not to-day alone,' he says, 'but every day in the year should be Christmas. The sentiments which animate and sweeten this season would, if they were exercised continually, be the mightiest soldiers that can be found against ignorance, and misery, and crime; they would raise humanity to a higher level—nearer to the divine spirit which raises *it* above the level of the brute—nearer to the example which is worshipped in theory, the example set by Him who bade you bear one another's burdens.' The day is spent in rational enjoyment. They walk to a spot endeared to Sassafras and

Bluebell by the tenderest memories—to echo-land. Again they wake the echoes; again the inspired hollow speaks and sings. The scene is even more beautiful now in their eyes than in the summer. The pure white snow lies lightly on hill and plain, and beautifies every bare branch. 'Such a scene as this,' says Coltsfoot, 'always brings to my mind, in some way, a picture of creation before the first day, when the world was waiting for God's breath to awaken it to life and blossom.' 'To me,' says Sassafras, 'it brings the fancy of the world sleeping after a fever of turbulent years;' and adds, 'The world is all asleep, and we stand here, musing on things that in the lap of time have sunk to rest.' Sassafras and Bluebell wander to the spot where he first told her that he loved her: though nothing but snow meets their eyes, the flowers are blooming as brightly for them as on that bright summer day which filled their lives with tender memories. In the evening they are all together in the cottage, and the three little girls, with their violins, play important parts. Robin looks at Iris, and the idea suddenly occurs to him that she is very pretty; but his mind is not of the strongest, and there the idea remains, without forcing itself into expression. Bluebell is unusually quiet, and they do not disturb her. The fire crackles and glows, and she gazes long into the bright blaze, with eyes so happy and wistful that a few words whispered to her in a soft tone by Sassafras bring tears into them. She takes his hand, and her fingers twine round his with convulsive tenderness.

And now it is New-Year's night, and Sassafras and Coltsfoot are walking slowly to and fro outside the cottage, in the windows of which lights are gleaming. Every now and then Sassafras steps gently into the cottage, and in a few moments comes out again and rejoins Coltsfoot. No word passes between them. A life dear to both is hanging upon the moments. Hark! a cry reaches their ears—a cry so faint that none but ears attuned to love could hear it. Coltsfoot passes his arm round his friend to support him, for on that cry a sudden dizziness has come upon Sassafras. Still neither speaks; but both are mutely praying that the life so dear to them may be spared. The door of the cottage is softly opened, and a cheerful face invites Sassafras to enter. When, in a few minutes, Sassafras comes from the cottage, his eyes are filled with tears of joy and gratitude; he holds out his hand to Coltsfoot. 'Thank God!' he says, with a sob; 'all is well.' And then he turns from his friend, and muses upon the new and solemn responsibility which has entered into his life.

Time rolls on. Men fret and chafe their hearts in the pursuit of small things, which they falsely magnify into desirable possessions, and neglect the priceless blessings and joys which nature holds out to them with willing, untiring hand. When Bluebell steps into the sunlight again, she has a baby at her breast, and into the fresh young beauty of her face has stolen that ineffable expression of holy tenderness which dwells only in the face

of the mother. Ah, how happy are the days! how sweet the evenings when she and Sassafras sit in their little humble room, gazing upon the child which has drawn life from them! Sassafras wants nothing, years for nothing; he has about him all that can make life sweet. He is not poor, for he has enough; and yet he has but little. But content is a treasure outweighing gold and silver, and this treasure he has. He looks back upon his past life with amazement at the folly of men, and morning and night he thanks God that he has escaped from the thralldom which poisoned his days and made a slave of him. So happy is he that he trembles at the idea of discovery. But nothing occurs to disturb the harmony of his life. Besides, he is now a bearded man, and few would be able to recognise him. What with his work in the day, and his duties in Coltsfoot's school in the evening, he is employed fourteen hours out of the twenty-four. He enjoys a glow of health to which he has hitherto been a stranger; he enjoys the air, the sunshine, the breath of summer, and the invigorating breezes which winter brings in its train.

'It is true,' he thinks, 'that I am no longer a King, but I feel that I am a man.'

He cannot quite banish thought of the past, although he strives to do so. He keeps himself steadily aloof from all political matters, and flies from them as though a plague were attached to them; but at odd times thought of No-land and his Court and people intrudes itself against his will, and seems to whisper in a tone of steel, 'Nay, I will

be heard!' It comes upon him once—he is impelled by the same inward force, and cannot resist—to introduce politics into a conversation with Coltsfoot. They have been to hear a social sermon from the lips of a preacher, upon whom many of his brethren look with displeasure and aversion. Strange to say, this preacher is a Bishop. Strange, because he is not content with flowing platitudes; because with firm hand he grasps the nettle Danger in his search for the flower Safety; because he is unsparing in his denunciation of the follies and frivolities which pervade certain classes of society, and is bitterly severe upon those who make pleasure the chief business of their lives. This Bishop thanks God that there are some few 'noble men and women rising above this utter animalism, this low sensualism, and who do endeavour to realise that they have a duty to discharge to God and man;' and says, 'though philosophers may make themselves merry at the expense of Christianity, and though clever writers may run down so-called sectarian schools, and think it the height of enjoyment to ride on the box of a four-in-hand or sail in a yacht, these are not the things by which a man may discharge his conscience to God.' Bitterly does he deplore that so many men and women in high places 'go through the world with blinkers over their eyes, shutting out the painful sights around them, or stop their ears with wool, so that they may not hear the cry of the fatherless; and yet these men and women have a sunny kind of belief that they are performing life's duties worthily, and

that to be seen in a church now and then during the year is a cloak for their idle aimless hours and days.'

These words make a deep impression upon Sassafras, and he says to Coltsfoot, as they walk out of church:

'The preacher seems to think that there is as wide a difference now between classes in No-land as there was before the disappearance of the King.'

'You have been too happy in your domestic life,' replies Coltsfoot, 'to pay much heed to politics; and as I have observed, when I have introduced political matters into our conversations, that you have been desirous of avoiding the discussion of them, I have not pressed them upon you. But the change in the political condition of the country has not, up to this day, resulted in a better state of things for the people. I think that the man who was chosen to represent the opinions of the new governing power would confess as much. The time was not ripe for change. If you want a tree, after it has attained a full and strong growth, to grow one way or the other, it must be trained very gently. These men demanded an impossibility. They asked for equality, and already they have shown themselves utterly unfit for government; already they are quarrelling among themselves for place and pay. The flavour of Egypt's flesh-pots has proved too strong for their patriotism.'

'I have never heard you express an opinion,' says Sassafras, 'upon the action of the King in deserting his post.'

'He was both weak,' replies

Coltsfoot, 'and wanting in a sense of duty.'

Sassafras does not pursue the subject; and indeed presently it fades from his mind before the pressure of a deep affliction. His child, so sweet a source of joy and happiness in their home, sickens and dies. The little one lies ill for many days and nights, and neither love, nor unwearied attention, nor heartfelt prayers can save it. The mother, in her care for her darling, begrudges the claims which nature makes upon her; and even when, after long, long hours of watching, sleep mercifully steals from her for a little while the pangs of grief she suffers, she will not leave her darling, but lies by his side with her hand upon his neck, as though, by that tender caress, she can move the Angel of Death to stay his hand. In vain. The last hour comes surely, and in the dead of night the flower dies with the dim light of its parents' eyes shining upon it.

Come from the chamber with me; the grief of these stricken souls is too deep, too sacred for our eyes. They find consolation in their faithful love for each other, and a stronger consolation in prayer. In the chamber of death, with the inanimate form of their beloved before them, they see a light beyond the grave. It falls upon the face of their child, and he lives again, and stretches out his arms to them.

So Bluebell and Sassafras live their lives throughout three changes of the seasons.

But this Christmas shall be the last they shall spend together in that humble cottage of love and content.



XVI.

CUNNING LITTLE DICK.

THE change came about in a strange way. It had been Coltsfoot's habit for many years to visit certain places on Christmas-day, and he had often spoken to Sassafras of the beautiful and touching scenes he had witnessed at this season in a large hospital, where the sick poor were cared for. Sassafras had expressed a wish to see these scenes, and upon this Christmas night he accompanied Coltsfoot to the hospital. They left Bluebell at home, with Iris, Lucerne, and Daisy, saying they would return at nine o'clock. Robin was also at home, making big eyes at Iris, and thinking, as

he had thought three years ago, how pretty she was. He had not, however, yet mustered sufficient courage to put his thought in words.

On their way to the hospital, Coltsfoot conversed with Sassafras upon the state of the country, and Sassafras learnt much that astonished him. The new administration had utterly failed to remedy the evils of which the people had complained; the most unscrupulous of the Quamoclit and Whortleberries had got into power, and were making the worst use of it. Not only were they incompetent, they were corrupt; and the people in every part of No-land were crying out for a change.

'Change!' exclaimed Sassafras. 'What change?'

'They say they were happier under Sassafras, and they are asking where he is. The papers are full of the theme; even the papers owned by the Reformers say it would be a happy day for the country if the King could be found and induced to resume his crown. The principal one of these papers is edited by Old Humanity—'

'Do you know that man?' inquired Sassafras, in an agitated tone.

'I have frequently conversed with him, and if I meet him in no other place, I meet him often at the hospital we are going to now. He has a daughter there, a nurse. Well, even Old Humanity, although his opinions are in no ways changed, has said in his paper that it would be well if the King could be found. This man, very singularly, speaks in somewhat affectionate terms of Sassafras; it seems that on the occasion on

which he acted as spokesman for the people he was most favourably impressed by the demeanour of the young King. The mystery is what can have become of him. Some say he is dead; yet his body has not been found. Old Humanity declares that the King is alive, and in No-land; if so, he has concealed himself cunningly. But here we are at the hospital.'

Sassafras, disturbed as he was by what he had just heard, found much that interested him in this hospital. He would fain have lingered long in the children's ward, which was beautifully lit up by hundreds of small Christmas candles of yellow, and green, and red, and blue. The ward was lined with straight rows of cots, every one of which had its child occupant, and the eyes of all were fixed with eager gaze upon the coloured lights which made the scene brilliant. Some of the sick children lay upon their backs, very still and quiet, and from the snow-white bed-linen peeped pitiful white faces; the faces of others were joyous; some clapped their little hands; and some rose in their cots, and seemed as though they would have wished things to go on for ever in this way. Not one of the children in this ward was more than twelve years of age; some were mere babies; but there were many old, old faces among them. Before one of these old faces Coltsfoot paused. The child—who was so thin and small that he looked scarcely eight years of age, but was two or three years older—was lying on his side, gazing upon the coloured candles, which, as they wasted away, but too surely typi-

fied his fate. There was not a trace of pleasure in his sullen eyes, and in his pinched, old, weazen face there was the cunning of a fox.

'Cunning little Dick he's called,' whispered the nurse, 'and I've been told that he is proud of the title, although, since he has been here, I have never seen any other expression on his face than that which rests there now. He was brought here three weeks ago, having been run over and crushed badly, but never a murmur has escaped his lips.'

Coltsfoot had started at the name.

'Do you remember,' he said in a low tone to Sassafras, 'the Christmas-day we spent together when you were a boy, before you went on your travels, and the scene we witnessed in that miserable garret, where a woman lay dead of starvation? Do you remember the baby I found in a corner of the room, and the name they called it by? Dick—little Dick—cunning little Dick!'

Two other persons were now at the bedside. Sassafras trembled as his eyes fell upon the form of Old Humanity. A lad who accompanied the old man stood by the bedside. Not noticing Sassafras's agitation, Coltsfoot continued, 'This poor child must be cunning little Dick.'

Old Humanity heard the words, and joined in the conversation.

'Yes, that is the boy's name. He has been brought up in the gutters, and the prison has been his best home, God help him!'

Coltsfoot sighed, and at that moment Old Humanity raised his eyes, and looked Sassafras full in

the face. Sassafras turned red, then white, beneath the fixed gaze of the old man, and stepped a pace or two away from the bed. Old Humanity also moved away, but he did not remove his eyes from Sassafras's face. He seemed to be puzzling out some problem.

The nurse stooped, and said something kind and gentle to cunning little Dick; but the lad made no response in word or look, although her tone was most motherly and soft.

'It wasn't his fault,' said the nurse, in reply to an observation from Coltsfoot; 'he had picked a pocket, and was running away. People ran after him, and while he was crossing from one side of the road to the other a man knocked him down. A brewer's dray was passing at the time, and the poor little fellow fell beneath the horses' feet, and was picked up terribly crushed.'

Coltsfoot laid his hand upon the nurse's arm with gentle significance, and they both watched the face of cunning little Dick, seeing there what was hidden from the others. The two candles which were on the little table by Dick's side were almost burnt out, and the lad's eyes never wandered from them. Coltsfoot knelt by the bed, and took a little wasted hand in his.

'Dick,' he said, in a whisper, 'I want you to say a prayer; listen, and repeat after me; it will do you good.'

Dick listened, never turning his eyes from the light, and a faint smile of scorn came to his lips; he uttered no word. One of the candles was almost at its last gasp; it flickered and flickered.

'What's that you say, Dick?' ask-

ed Coltsfoot, for the lad's lips were moving.

Dick's features assumed a more cunning expression. The words he strove to speak could scarcely be said to be spoken, they were so faint and low, but Coltsfoot heard them.

'Not guilty, yer worship.'

With a convulsive gasp the candle gave up its life, and cunning little Dick closed his eyes. He made no farther movement, and presently, with a look of grief, the nurse placed cunning little Dick's arms inside the bed, and covered his face with the white sheet. Then Coltsfoot murmured,

'To him who said, "Suffer little children to come unto me," one has gone this moment. And this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality.'

With sad hearts they left the hospital, Old Humanity walking with them. Sassafras would have felt more at his ease had the old man not accompanied them; but Coltsfoot found pleasure in the old Reformer's society, and they talked together until they arrived at the cottage. The clear pictures which Old Humanity drew of the political state of affairs were revelations to Sassafras.

'Then you are ready to admit,' said Coltsfoot, 'that the experiment has been a failure?'

'A distinct failure,' replied Old Humanity; 'we have gone from bad to worse. The transition was too violent, and we were not prepared; neither are we strong enough in numbers. As things are, nothing better can occur than the return of Sassafras, with a proper understanding of his duties and

responsibilities. I saw him only once; but I seldom forget a face, and never forget a voice.'

Sassafras shrank from the old man's side.

'I never saw the King,' said Coltsfoot.

'Are you sure of that?' questioned the old man.

'Quite sure.'

A thoughtful smile played about the lips of Old Humanity.

'I was surprised when I first set eyes on him. I saw a young man, with an earnest face, in which doubt and distress were plainly visible. I seemed to see in his eyes a struggle to arrive at the truth of things. I thought, "Here plainly is a man who, with proper counsellors about him, might become a fit leader of a great people." I was certain that the vicious stories I had heard about him were false, and I went from his presence with a strange feeling of respect and pity for him.'

'You still believe he is alive?'

'I am convinced of it. If I had any doubts before to-day, they are now dispelled.'

Sassafras understood the meaning of these words. They had now arrived at the cottage.

'I suppose,' said Old Humanity, 'that I must wish you good-night here.'

'Unless you will join our Christmas party,' replied Coltsfoot.

Old Humanity looked at Sassafras, waiting for him to speak, and Sassafras was constrained to say,

'I shall be glad if you will spend an hour with us.'

Old Humanity bent his head with grave courtesy, and entered the cottage with them. He re-

mained until late in the night, contributing to the happiness of the party, and curiously observant of everything about him.

XVII.

IT WAS CHRISTMAS THROUGHOUT ALL THE LAND.

SASSAFRAS was not permitted to remain long in doubt of Old Humanity's intentions. Within a week after Christmas he saw from his cottage window a group of persons approaching, led by Coltsfoot. They had timed their visit well, choosing the mid-hour of the day, when he generally spent an hour at home. Bluebell was in the room, and, seeing marks of disturbance on her husband's face, she came close to his side with looks of anxious affection. Following the direction of his gaze, she saw the persons upon whom his eyes were fixed.

'They are coming here,' she said.

'I am afraid so,' he muttered.

'Have you anything to fear from them?' she asked apprehensively.

'Much. My happiness is in their hands.'

She did not understand his words, but they filled her with alarm.

'One word, Bluebell,' he said hurriedly. 'Has your married life been a happy one?'

'Can you ask? Can you ask?' she exclaimed. 'O my darling, what is the meaning of this change in you?'

'You will know all presently. I have not time to explain, but you will learn from them. Strengthen me, my heart's treasure. Look into my eyes, and assure me again of your love. Ah, my sweet! what perfect joy have I tasted during these three happy years! Hush! they are here.'

But he did not loose her. He

stood with his arms around her dear form, and faced the persons who entered the room. Old Humanity, Lord Crabtree, and a number of other Reformers and Courtiers composed the group. As they entered they removed their hats, and stood before Sassafras with uncovered heads. Coltsfoot was the first to speak.

'These gentlemen requested me to accompany them. Believing, as they said, that their business with you was urgent, I led them to the cottage when I knew they would find you at home.'

It was not without intention that he had chosen the simplest words in which to explain his presence among them. He stepped aside, and Old Humanity came to the front. His first words caused a shiver to run through Bluebell's frame, and a startled look to flash into Coltsfoot's eyes.

'Your Majesty,' said Old Humanity, with straight directness, 'we, a deputation from all ranks of society, from the highest to the lowest, have been appointed to wait upon you to beg you to resume your rightful position in the land. Had we known earlier where we could have found you, we should have come to you. This is not the time nor this the place to enter lengthily upon our reasons. Having, as I think, some knowledge of the workings of your heart and mind, I do most truly believe that it will be sufficient incentive

to you to accede to the wish of your people when I tell you that their condition is worse to-day than it was during the time you sat upon the throne.'

'Your most gracious Majesty,' interrupted Lord Crabtree, with tears in his eyes, betraying an intention to fall at his royal master's feet.

'Silence, my lord!' cried Sassafras in a stern tone. 'Let this man speak.'

Old Humanity continued: 'It is my purpose, and it will best serve our ends, to be brief on this occasion. You will have an opportunity hereafter of proving the truth of my words.'

Then, in a manly manner, without abating one jot of his independence, he recounted the experiences of the last few years. He had found that those who entertained his opinions from conviction, founded on reason, formed but a small body of the people; around this small body surged vast numbers of Quamoclots and Whortleberries, who had wrested the power from the hands of the Reformers, and who, being rapacious men and ignorant of the first principles of good government, had shown only an anxiety to enrich themselves at the expense of the people. The consequence was that large employers of labour, distrustful of their political rulers, were gradually narrowing their operations; thousands of men were out of employment; trade was languishing; there were much misery and distress throughout the country; the respect in which No-land was held by other nations was rapidly diminishing, and there was great danger that the senseless and arrogant folly of the Quamoclots and Whortleberries

would bring on a disastrous foreign war, if it did not provoke a worse evil in the shape of civil dissension. These and other matters Old Humanity briefly and forcibly touched upon, and concluded by frankly declaring that when on a former occasion he had accepted the position of spokesman for the people, he had committed a serious error.

When he had concluded others pressed forward to speak, but Sassafras held up his hand. He had heard enough, he said, and he bade them depart and return to the cottage in an hour for his answer.

The deputation withdrew, and Sassafras, Bluebell, and Coltsfoot were left alone. The countenance of Sassafras was distressed; that of Coltsfoot was grave and thoughtful; Bluebell, standing a little apart, watched them both with eyes of anxious love and friendship.

'Come to my side, Bluebell,' said Sassafras, 'and let me try to gather wisdom from love.'

Bluebell moved close to her husband; he took her hand in his.

'You are not angry with me, Bluebell, for having deceived you?'

'No, my King—'

Her hand dropped from his grasp as he cried,

'Bluebell!'

So sharp was his note of agony, as he detected in her tone such hesitation and reserve as she would naturally adopt when speaking to one far above her in station, that she trembled before him. Raising her eyes, she saw him with yearning love in his face, holding out his arms towards her. She fell into them, and he kissed her sweet face again and again.

'Your husband, darling, your mate; not your King.'

'My husband, my mate, my heart's delight!'

'Always, for ever, until the last day!'

His full love would be satisfied with no less; and she repeated the words after him with a deep happiness in her heart.

'Never to change, darling, whatever occurs,' he said.

'Never to change, my dearest. If I thought otherwise I should die.'

'We have been very happy here, Bluebell.'

She sighed. What was the future to be?

'If,' he continued, 'all lots in life were set before me, I would choose this life that we have led, and gratefully live my days until the end comes. Surely, in so doing, I should be violating no law, human or divine! I work for my bread, and by the labour of my hands I supply the wants of those whom I love. What higher dignity can I desire? I work, I enjoy, I do no man wrong, and I thank God for all. Why should I change? Within these walls great happiness has been mine; they are sanctified by the dear memories that love and friendship have created; they seem to speak to me as I look upon them, and seem to beg me to remain. Here our firstborn drew his first breath; his grave is near; here have I tasted the sweetness that lies in sorrow, the love that lies in affliction, the hope and the joy that are born of faith; here have I been drawn nearer to God! Counsel me, Bluebell; advise me, dear woman! What shall I do?'

Bluebell looked pleadingly at

Coltsfoot; his countenance had not changed its thoughtful expression.

'It is for you to decide, dear love,' said Bluebell; 'you are wiser and stronger than I. However it is to be, believe that I shall be happy if you are satisfied.'

Sassafras paced the apartment in serious mental disturbance. He also looked at Coltsfoot, who, however, made no sign. Then said Sassafras, somewhat bitterly,

'Are you waiting for permission to speak before the King?'

'No,' replied Coltsfoot, in a gentle tone, 'I am waiting to hear how your best judgment prompts you to decide.'

'You have heard. I covet no other lot than this. I desire no higher.'

'You speak out of your selfishness, then.'

'I speak out of my heart.'

'What would you say of the soldier who, when his country, for a just cause, demands the strength of his arm, slinks out of the ranks, and hides in his chimney corner?'

'The soldier enlists of his own free will. To desert at such a moment is the act of a coward.'

'What, then, of the man who, placed by destiny at the head of a great nation, and having within his hands the power of achieving great good, flies fretfully from his responsibilities, because he has not the strength of mind to set his heel upon the littlenesses with which established routine declares his life must be occupied? When you say you desire no higher lot than this, you speak out of your blindness. So can I fancy some Sybarite speaking, who maintains that there is no higher aim in life than the indulgence of luxuriousness. And while

the world is groaning round about him, he, wrapt in his silken cloak of selfish ease and effeminacy, heeds not, hears not, the suffering cries of his brothers and sisters. O,' cried Coltsfoot, with passionate fervour, 'that I had been born to power as you were ! that I possessed the capacity which is yours, and which you regard so lightly, of healing the wounds of a great people ! I would lift my lance against ignorance. I would give good opportunity to those who are born low down. I would root uncleanliness out of my land. I would honour true merit. I would wage war against the fashions which drift a nation upon the rocks of false morality. I would walk with my eyes open through the streets of my country, and I would do my best to purify them. I would be a priest to my people—a healer. By my example, I would make simplicity honoured. Religion should be something more than a tradition, and God should be worshipped on Mondays and Tuesdays, and the other week-days—worshipped, as He should be worshipped, in houses and streets as well as in churches, by the living of good lives and the constant exercise of charity and virtue. So would I walk through my life and live my days, and fulfil the solemn trust which had fallen into my hands—leaving behind me, when my task was done, an honourable name, built upon solid foundation, and a heritage of good deeds to grace my children's lives, and make them loved throughout the land !'

* * * *

A year has passed, and Sassafras reigns again in No-land. Lord Crabtree is dismissed, and by the King's side, for counsellors, are Coltsfoot and Old Humanity. Wise counsellors, indeed, are they; they strike at the very root of evil; false fashions and sham moralities fall beneath their lances, and glittering masks are torn from the faces of idols hitherto worshipped in high places. Short as is the time that has elapsed since the events recorded in the last chapters, great deeds have been done, and, with God's help, greater still will be accomplished. Sassafras is beloved by all; and even more beloved than he is Bluebell, whose modesty, simplicity, and goodness have endeared her to the hearts of the people. Their pictures—hers with a baby in her arms—hang upon the walls of every lowly cottage in the land; and when she walks or rides through the streets, loving eyes follow her, and loving hearts treasure up the affectionate looks she bestows upon them. Iris, Lucerne, and Daisy live in Bluebell's cottage, and many are the happy hours Sassafras and Bluebell spend in that dear home. And when the Good Season comes round again, men and women who have the means are influenced by the bright example set them by their King and Queen, and go among the poor and lowly, and the light of good deeds shines upon their way. Truly a blessing has fallen upon the country, and it is Christmas throughout all the land.

THE END.