

The Fairy Wicket

From digging in the sandy, over-triturated soil of times historical, all dotted with date and number and sign, how exquisite the relief in turning to the dear days outside history -- yet not so very far off neither for us nurslings of the northern sun -- when kindly beasts would loiter to give counsel by the wayside, and a fortunate encounter with one of the Good People was a surer path to Fortune and the Bride than the best-worn stool that ever proved step-ladder to aspiring youth. For then the Fairy Wicket stood everywhere ajar -- everywhere and to each and all. "Open, open, green hill!" -- you needed no more recondite sesame than that: and, whoever you were, you might have a glimpse of the elfin dancers in the hall that is litten within by neither sun nor moon; or catch at the white horse's bridle as the Fairy Prince rode through. It has been closed now this many a year (the fairies, always strong in the field, are excellent wicket-keepers); and if it open at all, 'tis but for a moment's mockery of the material generation that so deliberately turned its back on the gap into Elf-Land -- that first stage to the Beyond.

It was a wanton trick, though, that these folk of malice used to play on a small school-boy, new kicked out of his nest into the draughty, uncomfortable outer world, his unfledged skin still craving the feathers whereinto he was wont to nestle. The barrack-like school, the arid, cheerless class-rooms, drove him to Nature for redress; and, under an alien sky, he would go forth and wander along the iron road

by impassive fields, so like yet so unlike those hitherto a part of him and responding to his every mood. And to him, thus loitering with overladen heart, there would come suddenly a touch of warmth, of strange surprise. The turn of the road just ahead -- that, sure, is not all unfamiliar? That row of elms -- it cannot entirely be accident that they range just so? And, if not accident, then round the bend will come the old duck-pond, the shoulder of the barn will top it, a few yards on will be the gate -- it swings-to with its familiar click -- the dogs race down the avenue -- and then -- and then! It is all wildly fanciful; and yet, though knowing not Tertullian, a "credo quia impossibile" is on his tongue as he quickens his pace -- for what else can he do? A step, and the spell is shattered -- all is cruel and alien once more; while every copse and hedge-row seems a-tinkle with faint elfish laughter. The Fairies have had their joke: they have opened the wicket one of their own hand's-breadths, and shut it in their victim's face. When next that victim catches a fairy, he purposes to tie up the brat in sight of his own green hill, and set him to draw up a practical scheme for Village Councils.

One of the many women I ever really loved, fair in the fearless old fashion, was used to sing, in the blithe, unfettered accent of the people: "I'd like to be a fairy, And dance upon my toes, I'd like to be a fairy, And wear short close!" And in later life it is to her sex that the wee (but very wise) folk sometimes delegate their power of torment. Such understudies are found to play the part exceeding well; and many a time the infatuated youth believes he sees in the depth of

one sole pair of eyes -- blue, brown, or green (the fairy colour) --
the authentic fairy wicket standing ajar: many a time must he hear the
quaint old formula, "I'm sure, if I've ever done anything to lead you
to think," etc (runs it not so?), ere he shall realise that here is
the gate upon no magic pleasance but on a cheap suburban villa,
banging behind the wrathful rate-collector or hurled open to speed the
pallid householder to the Registrar's Office. In still grosser
habitations, too, they lurk, do the People of Mischief, ready to
frolic out on the unsuspecting one: as in the case, which still haunts
my memory, of a certain bottle of an historic Château-Yquem, hued like
Venetian glass, odorous as a garden in June. Forth from out the faint
perfume of this haunted drink there danced a bevy from Old France,
clad in the fashion of Louis-Quinze, peach-coloured knots of ribbon
bedizening apple-green velvets, as they moved in stately wise among
the roses of the old garden, to the quaint music -- Rameau, was it? --
of a fairy cornemuse, while fairy Watteaus, Fragonards, Lancretts, sat
and painted them. Alas! too shallow the bottle, too brief the brawls:
not to be recalled by any quantity of Green Chartreuse.