

## THE FINDING OF THE PRINCESS.

It was the day I was promoted to a tooth-brush. The girls, irrespective of age, had been thus distinguished some time before; why, we boys could never rightly understand, except that it was part and parcel of a system of studied favouritism on behalf of creatures both physically inferior and (as was shown by a fondness for tale-bearing) of weaker mental fibre. It was not that we yearned after these strange instruments in themselves; Edward, indeed, applied his to the scrubbing-out of his squirrel's cage, and for personal use, when a superior eye was grim on him, borrowed Harold's or mine, indifferently; but the nimbus of distinction that clung to them--that we coveted exceedingly. What more, indeed, was there to ascend to, before the remote, but still possible, razor and strop?

Perhaps the exaltation had mounted to my head; or nature and the perfect morning joined to him at disaffection; anyhow, having breakfasted, and triumphantly repeated the collect I had broken down in the last Sunday--'twas one without rhythm or alliteration: a most objectionable collect--having achieved thus much, the small natural man in me rebelled, and I vowed, as I straddled and spat about the stable-yard in feeble imitation of the coachman, that lessons might go to the Inventor of them. It was only geography that morning, any way: and the practical thing was worth any quantity of bookish theoretic; as for me, I was going on my travels, and imports and exports, populations and capitals, might very well wait while I explored the breathing, coloured world

outside.

True, a fellow-rebel was wanted; and Harold might, as a rule, have been counted on with certainty. But just then Harold was very proud. The week before he had "gone into tables," and had been endowed with a new slate, having a miniature sponge attached, wherewith we washed the faces of Charlotte's dolls, thereby producing an unhealthy pallor which struck terror into the child's heart, always timorous regarding epidemic visitations. As to "tables," nobody knew exactly what they were, least of all Harold; but it was a step over the heads of the rest, and therefore a subject for self-adulation and--generally speaking--airs; so that Harold, hugging his slate and his chains, was out of the question now. In such a matter, girls were worse than useless, as wanting the necessary tenacity of will and contempt for self-constituted authority. So eventually I slipped through the hedge a solitary protestant, and issued forth on the lane what time the rest of the civilised world was sitting down to lessons.

The scene was familiar enough; and yet, this morning, how different it all seemed! The act, with its daring, tinted everything with new, strange hues; affecting the individual with a sort of bruised feeling just below the pit of the stomach, that was intensified whenever his thoughts flew back to the ink-stained, smelly schoolroom. And could this be really me? or was I only contemplating, from the schoolroom aforesaid, some other jolly young mutineer, faring forth under the genial sun? Anyhow, here was the friendly well, in its old place, half

way up the lane. Hither the yoke-shouldering village-folk were wont to come to fill their clinking buckets; when the drippings made worms of wet in the thick dust of the road. They had flat wooden crosses inside each pail, which floated on the top and (we were instructed) served to prevent the water from slopping over. We used to wonder by what magic this strange principle worked, and who first invented the crosses, and whether he got a peerage for it. But indeed the well was a centre of mystery, for a hornet's nest was somewhere hard by, and the very thought was fearsome. Wasps we knew well and disdained, storming them in their fastnesses. But these great Beasts, vested in angry orange, three stings from which--so 't was averred--would kill a horse, these were of a different kidney, and their warning drone suggested prudence and retreat. At this time neither villagers nor hornets encroached on the stillness: lessons, apparently, pervaded all Nature. So, after dabbling awhile in the well--what boy has ever passed a bit of water without messing in it?--I scrambled through the hedge, avoiding the hornet-haunted side, and struck into the silence of the copse.

If the lane had been deserted, this was loneliness become personal. Here mystery lurked and peeped; here brambles caught and held with a purpose of their own, and saplings whipped the face with human spite. The copse, too, proved vaster in extent, more direfully drawn out, than one would ever have guessed from its frontage on the lane: and I was really glad when at last the wood opened and sloped down to a streamlet brawling forth into the sunlight. By this cheery companion I wandered along, conscious of little but that Nature, in providing store of water-rats,

had thoughtfully furnished provender of right-sized stones. Rapids, also, there were, telling of canoes and portages--crinkling bays and inlets--caves for pirates and hidden treasures--the wise Dame had forgotten nothing--till at last, after what lapse of time I know not, my further course, though not the stream's, was barred by some six feet of stout wire netting, stretched from side to side, just where a thick hedge, arching till it touched, forbade all further view.

The excitement of the thing was becoming thrilling. A Black Flag must surely be fluttering close by. Here was evidently a malignant contrivance of the Pirates, designed to baffle our gun-boats when we dashed up-stream to shell them from their lair. A gun-boat, indeed, might well have hesitated, so stout was the netting, so close the hedge: but I spied where a rabbit was wont to pass, close down by the water's edge; where a rabbit could go a boy could follow, albeit stomach-wise and with one leg in the stream; so the passage was achieved, and I stood inside, safe but breathless at the sight.

Gone was the brambled waste, gone the flickering tangle of woodland. Instead, terrace after terrace of shaven sward, stone-edged, urn-cornered, stepped delicately down to where the stream, now tamed and educated, passed from one to another marble basin, in which on occasion gleams of red hinted at gold-fish in among the spreading water-lilies. The scene lay silent and slumbrous in the brooding noonday sun: the drowsing peacock squatted humped on the lawn, no fish leapt in the pools, nor bird declared himself from the environing hedges.

Self-confessed it was here, then, at last the Garden of Sleep!

Two things, in those old days, I held in especial distrust: gamekeepers and gardeners. Seeing, however, no baleful apparitions of either nature, I pursued my way between rich flower-beds, in search of the necessary Princess. Conditions declared her presence patently as trumpets; without this centre such surroundings could not exist. A pavilion, gold topped, wreathed with lush jessamine, beckoned with a special significance over close-set shrubs. There, if anywhere, She should be enshrined. Instinct, and some knowledge of the habits of princesses, triumphed; for (indeed) there She was! In no tranced repose, however, but laughingly, struggling to disengage her hand from the grasp of a grown-up man who occupied the marble bench with her. (As to age, I suppose now that the two swung in respective scales that pivoted on twenty. But children heed no minor distinctions; to them, the inhabited world is composed of the two main divisions: children and upgrown people; the latter being in no way superior to the former--only hopelessly different. These two, then, belonged to the grown-up section.) I paused, thinking it strange they should prefer seclusion when there were fish to be caught, and butterflies to hunt in the sun outside; and as I cogitated thus, the grown-up man caught sight of me.

"Hallo, sprat!" he said, with some abruptness, "where do you spring from?"

"I came up the stream," I explained politely and comprehensively, "and I

was only looking for the Princess."

"Then you are a water-baby," he replied. "And what do you think of the Princess, now you've found her?"

"I think she is lovely," I said (and doubtless I was right, having never learned to flatter). "But she's wide-awake, so I suppose somebody has kissed her!"

This very natural deduction moved the grown-up man to laughter; but the Princess, turning red and jumping up, declared that it was time for lunch.

"Come along, then," said the grown-up man; "and you too, Water-baby; come and have something solid. You must want it."

I accompanied them, without any feeling of false delicacy. The world, as known to me, was spread with food each several mid-day, and the particular table one sat at seemed a matter of no importance. The palace was very sumptuous and beautiful, just what a palace ought to be; and we were met by a stately lady, rather more grownup than the Princess--apparently her mother.

My friend the Man was very kind, and introduced me as the Captain, saying I had just run down from Aldershot. I didn't know where Aldershot was, but had no manner of doubt that he was perfectly right. As a rule,

indeed, grown-up people are fairly correct on matters of fact; it is in the higher gift of imagination that they are so sadly to seek.

The lunch was excellent and varied. Another gentleman in beautiful clothes--a lord, presumably--lifted me into a high carved chair, and stood behind it, brooding over me like a Providence. I endeavoured to explain who I was and where I had come from, and to impress the company with my own tooth-brush and Harold's tables; but either they were stupid--or is it a characteristic of Fairyland that every one laughs at the most ordinary remarks? My friend the Man said good-naturedly, "All right, Water-baby; you came up the stream, and that's good enough for us." The lord--a reserved sort of man, I thought--took no share in the conversation.

After lunch I walked on the terrace with the Princess and my friend the Man, and was very proud. And I told him what I was going to be, and he told me what he was going to be; and then I remarked, "I suppose you two are going to get married?" He only laughed, after the Fairy fashion. "Because if you aren't," I added, "you really ought to": meaning only that a man who discovered a Princess, living in the right sort of Palace like this, and didn't marry her there and then, was false to all recognised tradition.

They laughed again, and my friend suggested I should go down to the pond and look at the gold-fish, while they went for a stroll.

I was sleepy, and assented; but before they left me, the grown-up man put two half-crowns in my hand, for the purpose, he explained, of treating the other water-babies. I was so touched by this crowning mark of friendship that I nearly cried; and thought much more of his generosity than of the fact that the Princess; ere she moved away, stooped down and kissed me.

I watched them disappear down the path--how naturally arms seem to go round waists in Fairyland!--and then, my cheek on the cool marble, lulled by the trickle of water, I slipped into dreamland out of real and magic world alike. When I woke, the sun had gone in, a chill wind set all the leaves a-whispering, and the peacock on the lawn was harshly calling up the rain. A wild unreasoning panic possessed me, and I sped out of the garden like a guilty thing, wriggled through the rabbit-run, and threaded my doubtful way homewards, hounded by nameless terrors. The

half-crowns happily remained solid and real to the touch; but could I hope to bear such treasure safely through the brigand-haunted wood? It was a dirty, weary little object that entered its home, at nightfall, by the unassuming aid of the scullery-window: and only to be sent tealess to bed seemed infinite mercy to him. Officially tealess, that is; for, as was usual after such escapades, a sympathetic housemaid, coming delicately by backstairs, stayed him with chunks of cold pudding and condolence, till his small skin was tight as any drum. Then, nature asserting herself, I passed into the comforting kingdom of sleep, where, a golden carp of fattest build, I oared it in translucent waters with



a new half-crown snug under right fin and left; and thrust up a nose through water-lily leaves to be kissed by a rose-flushed Princess.