

## A FAIRY STORY

**I**T was the old story of the woodcutter's daughter, but he was by no means a prince.

The woodcutter had found him, one year, in the beautiful spring weather, lying in a daisy-pied meadow, sucking his thumb, and his rosy limbs warm with sunshine.

"Tut," said the woodcutter, "here is the very playmate for my baby daughter."

He was certainly an unsophisticated old man, with no eye to the future. But he had been brought up on fairy tales and felt, keenly, the necessity, the duty, of *acting his part*. So he folded the baby man-child in his arms and walked home.

The woodcutter's wife was not pleased.

"Fie upon your Grimm and your Andersen," she cried, "go, read in the books of Ibsen and of Shaw, and learn the error of your ways," and she burnt his supper of fried onions.

But she took the lovely, sleeping baby from her husband and clad him in a little woollen vest of her daughter's—infancy is deliciously unconventional—and put him on the hearthrug, where the other child sprawled lazily, and blinked at the fire.

While the woodman's wife washed the dishes, the woodcutter sat in a corner, silent, but not unhappy. Presently he fell asleep and dreamed that he journeyed again to the meadow where the child had been found, and there on the very spot shone and flamed a wonderful Crown of Gold.

"This is just as it should be," he heard himself saying. He bent down to take it in his hands, and it was only a ring of yellow buttercups. Then a wind came and scattered the petals far and away over the world.

The woodcutter awoke. His wife had put the babies to bed in the square, brown crib that stood against the wall—they were smiling in their sleep.

She sat beside them, fashioning baby clothes out of her new cambric skirt, evidently reasoning, like a wise woman, that

it is far, far safer to offer the other cheek to fate, without any fuss or nonsense.

So they grew out of babyhood and into childhood together, the Boy and the Girl.

The little hut on the top of the hill was filled by day with happy, rippling laughter.

The Girl was slender and dark eyed, with fine straight brows, and long silk-like hair.

He was shorter than she, far slower in his movements, pale faced and blue eyed, with a mop of the lightest flaxen curls.

“You are like a baby bird in a nest,” the Girl would say, rumpling his hair with both hands.

And when they were seven years old the woodcutter’s wife taught them their letters, how to count beads in a little steel frame, and how to embroider kettle-holders with canvas backs.

The Girl learnt eagerly—she seemed hungry for knowledge. When lesson time came, with flushed cheeks and shining eyes, she sat on a stool at her mother’s feet, and—“tell me *more*,” she would always say—“and next, mother, and next?”

But the Boy would remain silent, staring in front of him, dreaming.

The woodcutter's wife was an exceptional woman ; she was very "up" in everything. She had once lived a whole year in Bayswater, W., and had gone regularly to the pit of the Court Theatre, and taken a course at the Polytechnic, and she had sat in the same 'bus with George Bernard Shaw, and once seen Mr. G. K. Chesterton riding in a hansom. These little things cannot fail to leave their impress upon character ; they had stirred in her ideals, ideas, vague longings which took fierce life in her daughter. Why she had married the woodcutter was always a little vague. She was a plain woman with a shining complexion, and wore obtrusive hair-nets ; then her skirt-supporter invariably parted from her blouse. Perhaps these facts, and the woodcutter's dreaming disposition, explain the matter.

On winter evenings, when the cheerful domesticated fire roared appropriately up the chimney, the woodcutter used to lift the Boy on his knee, and "whisper." For the first time in his life he felt understood and appreciated. He told him all Grimm and the story of the "Wild Swans"—the Boy

hid his face and wept—the story of “Old Luk-Oie,” and “The Goloshes of Fortune,” and the “Red Shoes.”

And to the Boy, Karen was far more real than the Girl who sat by the woodcutter’s wife and learnt words of three syllables.

“Father,” he would whisper, when the stories were over, “I saw ten elves and a hundred fairies fly out of the vegetable dish at dinner.”

Then the old man would hold him fast and tell him that two snails poked their tongues out at a slug on the garden path that very afternoon.

“Mother,” said the Girl, “what is independence?”

Ah, she was certainly very advanced indeed.

They were twelve years old when the Wanderer came to spend the summer with them. He rented the little front bedroom, and brought with him a knapsack of clothes and two great cases of books.

And the woodcutter’s wife fed him on leeks and brown bread, and fresh walnuts, and on Sundays and Thursdays he had a little lime juice with his water. At three

o'clock every morning he weeded out carrots in the garden, and the Girl, peering out of the window, heard him singing softly as he worked, "Here with a loaf of bread beneath the bough."

He must be very hungry, she thought sympathetically.

At this time she had read all Shakespeare and "Lycidas" and "Paradise Lost," and Dickens, and "The Lady of the Lake." Her mother had read to her "You never can tell," "The Doll's House" and "Agla-vaine and Selysette."

The Boy was reading "What the Moon Saw," and worshipping the ground she trod upon.

One afternoon the Girl walked into the Wanderer's room. He was sitting on the bed writing a letter, his writing-pad on his knee. That is a horrible occupation, but the table had the inevitable deformed leg failing.

The Wanderer was irritable—he had tied a belt tightly round his waist, he had inhaled the perfume of two cabbage-roses, but the gnawing feeling remained unpacified.

“Well?” he said sharply, as the Girl stood by the door.

“I want to look at your books,” said she.

He glanced at her curiously. Her wonderful face gleamed strangely at him, from billow and billow of white pinafore.

“I’m—I’m quite exceptional,” she said, hastily, “I’m very advanced.”

“Oh, are you?” said the Wanderer.

“Don’t think of what I *look* like; as Mr. Shaw says, ‘You Never can Tell.’”

“Hang thee, sweet wench,” said the Wanderer, “come along here—you know the ‘Open Sesame’ and I’ll show you the books.”

And two hours later, they were both sitting on the floor—And he was reading her Omar Kháyám, and she was looking into Arthur Symons.

Then a new life began for the Girl. She, too, weeded carrots, and ate leeks and brown bread, and talked to the Wanderer.

And he told her of London, of Spain, of Paris, of Brussels, and again London.

And he taught her his ethics of life, and that unselfishness signifies lack of Progress

—and that she must avoid the Seven Deadly Virtues. And she printed a little text, and hung it above her washstand—“*The strongest man is he who stands most alone.*”

When the bracken was turning golden, and the days becoming short and cold, the Wanderer packed his knapsack and left them.

But he gave the Girl his books, and with them a little card bearing his name and address.

“When the time comes,” he said, “this will always find me.”

She did not understand, but she sewed the card inside her pocket, and kissed the Wanderer on both cheeks.

Winter came early that year.

The Boy began working with the Woodcutter. They left home each morning, with their lunch in a paper bag, and, through the day, they lived in an Enchanted Land—the Boy was a Prince and the Girl, at home, a Princess in her castle.

He was very, very happy.

She had begun reading seriously. The Woodcutter’s wife never allowed her to touch the housekeeping or the dishes—



“You must be very advanced” she always said, “you must find other things to do.”

And the Wanderer did not forget her. He sent her a post-card of Maxim Gorki, and a little book “The Virgins of the Rocks”; she did not understand it, but it gave her beautiful dreams.

One night, the following summer, the Girl sat on the doorstep watching the stars, and the Boy, beside her.

“Boy,” she said, “What are you going to do?”

“I am going to find the world,” he cried, standing up, and stretching out his thin arms to the moon, “And you—Girl?”

“I am going to find myself,” the Girl answered. She put her hand into her pocket, and pressed the Wanderer’s little card.

“Oh, the world,” said the Boy—“the people, the great battles, the wide streets, the castles, the dragons and the hidden places. All are to belong to me. I am going to be so famous that when I ride past on my white horse, the people will point at me crying, ‘See, there he goes, the boy who

has found the world ; the boy who has conquered the world.' And I shall sit in a bower made out of my laurel wreaths, and you shall be the queen and hold my hand. And I shall never be old, and always be beautiful."

"Do wisdom and beauty walk hand in hand?" said the Girl. She sat with her chin pillowed on her hand, and wondered.

A breeze shook the rose-bush above the door, and, round them, floated a flutter of white petals.

"See, summer snow," said the Boy, catching at them.

But the Girl suddenly sprang to her feet and flung her arms round his neck, and held his head against her little breast.

Then she ran into her room and locked the door. And the moonlight fell upon the text above the washstand. "The strongest man is he who stands most alone."

So two years passed.

Then the woodcutter's wife died.

She had been sitting at the table, cutting the leaves of "A Wife Without a Smile," when her heart stopped beating.

And the woodcutter, true to his vocation, died also. They were buried in a churchyard, miles away.

When the Girl and the Boy came back from the funeral, to the silent hut, the Boy put his hand into the Girl's and said, "Now we two are left. I must begin to learn to find the world. I must read all the books that have been written, and find what all truly great men have said, to prepare myself. And you shall mend my clothes, Girl, and cook my little meals."

But the Girl shook herself free and laughed, and ran from him down the hill, down the road to a little railway station. And she travelled all the way to London, with the wanderer's card unpicked from her pocket and clasped in her hand.

And when she had reached Liverpool Street Station a policeman showed her the way.

He lived in a great house. She was almost nervous when she was shown into the lofty drawing room, but the Wanderer had not changed.

She ran to him, her face aglow.

“ Oh, teach me to find myself,” she said.  
“ I have come to learn.”

So the Wanderer taught her many things.  
She was so exceedingly beautiful that he  
found pleasure in doing so.

Later she acted in great dramas, and  
when she rode in her carriage, in beautiful  
“ Doucet ” gowns, all the people pointed at  
her, and cried, “ See, there she goes—the  
Girl who has found herself, the Girl who has  
conquered the world.”

But in her bed, at night, she thought of  
the Boy in the little hut on the hill, and cried.

Left alone, the Boy was, at first, dazed  
with agony and surprise.

“ Ah, I understand,” he said, “ she could  
not stay with such a great simpleton. Wait  
till I have found the world.”

So he sent to Mudie's for cases of books,  
and he spent all his days and half his nights,  
reading. He became slower than ever in his  
movements, his face paler ; but “ I have not  
so long to wait now,” he said. “ Soon I  
shall be ready.”

And he wrote for more books and more  
books, until every room in the hut was full,

and they were heaped in great piles up to the ceiling. And one night, as he sat by the fireplace a great mountain of books, from the mantel-piece above, fell on him and killed him. It was very terrible.

“Ah,” said the poor Boy, as he lay dying, “if the Girl would only come now, and hold my head just once against her little breast.”

Then he died.

And there crept into the room a worn-out, bent old ghost, who lifted up the Boy's frail body, and laid him on a bed. An old ghost, who moaned and muttered about the “Little Sea Maid” and “The Snow Queen,” as he smoothed the Boy's hair.

Then he recklessly, savagely, pulled down all the roses—for it was summer—that grew above the door and spread them over him. And he lighted a little candle at the feet and at the head, and left the Boy—alone.

That afternoon the Girl had been acting in a great Matinee.

When it was over the Wanderer came round to her dressing room.

“Girl,” he said, “you have found yourself—now marry me.”

But she shook her head and ran past him into her motor brougham.

“Drive to Liverpool Street Station,” she said.

It was past midnight when the train reached the same little railway station.

The Girl felt that she could not run fast enough up the steep hill.

She saw the lights from the woodcutter’s hut.

“Oh, I have been a fool,” cried the Girl, “I do not want myself, and I do not want the world, but just the Boy, the Boy.”

She sobbed as she ran.

Then she came to the door—there were no roses, and the bush was all mangled and torn.

She lifted the latch, “Boy, Boy,” she said. Silence.

She walked in, past the sitting room—it was difficult to pick her way, she stumbled often—the books were so numerous—and into her little bedroom.

And the bed was heaped with white roses.

A candle burned at the head and a candle at the feet.

“So this is where it ends,” said the Girl.

She knelt softly by the bed.

Above the wash-stand she saw the faded text—"The strongest man is he who stands most alone"—she lifted the sheet, and the Boy, as of old, smiled at her.

All his flaxen hair was spread upon the pillow.

"Oh, my dear," said the Girl, kissing him on the mouth—and her heart broke.

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They were buried in a great meadow—daisy-pied—where the sun shone warmly.

And the morning after, when some children came with dahlia heads in little glass jam jars, a miracle had happened.

The grass grew green upon the little mound, and round it a wide crown of golden buttercups.

"Oh, look, look, how beautiful!" they cried.

But a wind came and scattered the petals far and away over the world.