

Four Prose Fancies

By Richard Le Gallienne

I—The Answer of the Rose

THE Sphinx and I sat in our little box at *Romeo and Juliet*. It was the first time she had seen that fairy-tale of passion upon the stage. I had seen it played once before—in Paradise. Therefore, I rather trembled to see it again in an earthly play-house, and as much as possible kept my eyes from the stage. All I knew of the performance—but how much was that!—was two lovely voices making love like angels; and when there were no words, the music told me what was going on. Love speaks so many languages.

One might as well look. It was as clear as moonlight to the tragic eye within the heart. The Sphinx was gazing on it all with those eyes that will never grow old, neither for years nor tears; but though I seemed to be seeing nothing but an advertisement of Paderewski pianos on the programme, I saw it—O didn't I see it?—all. The house had grown dark, and the music low and passionate, and for a moment no one was speaking. Only, deep in the thickets of my heart, there sang a tragic night-ingale that, happily, only I could hear; and I said to myself, "Now the young fool is climbing the orchard wall! Yes, there

go Benvolio and Mercutio calling him ; and now—‘he jests at scars who never felt a wound’—the other young fool is coming out on the balcony. God help them both ! They have no eyes—no eyes—or surely they would see the shadow that sings ‘Love ! Love ! Love !’ like a fountain in the moonlight, and then shrinks away to chuckle ‘Death ! Death ! Death !’ in the darkness !”

But, soft, what light from yonder window breaks !

The Sphinx turned to me for sympathy—this time it was the soul of Shakespeare in her eyes.

“Yes !” I whispered ; “it is the Opening of the Eternal Rose, sung by the Eternal Nightingale !”

She pressed my hand approvingly ; and while the lovely voices made their heavenly love, I slipped out my silver-bound pocket-book of ivory, and pressed within it the rose which had just fallen from my lips.

The worst of a great play is that one is so dull between the acts. Wit is sacrilege, and sentiment is bathos. Not another rose fell from my lips during the performance, though that I minded little, as I was the more able to count the pearls that fell from the Sphinx’s eyes.

It took quite half a bottle of champagne to pull us up to our usual spirits, as we sat at supper at a window where we could see London spread out beneath us like a huge black velvet flower, dotted with fiery embroideries, sudden flaring stamens, and rows of ant-like fireflies moving in slow zig-zag processions along and across its petals.

“How strange it seems,” said the Sphinx, “to think that for every two of those moving double-lights, which we know to be the eyes of hansoms, but which seem up here nothing but gold dots in a very barbaric pattern of black and gold, there are two human beings, no doubt at this time of night two lovers, throbbing

bing with the joy of life, and dreaming, heaven knows, what dreams !”

“Yes,” I rejoined ; “and to them I’m afraid we are even more impersonal. From their little Piccadilly coracles our watch-tower in the skies is merely a radiant façade of glowing windows, and no one of all who glide by realises that the spirited illumination is every bit due to your eyes. You have but to close them, and every one will be asking what has gone wrong with the electric light.”

A little nonsense is a great healer of the heart, and by means of such nonsense as this we grew merry again. And anon we grew sentimental and poetic, but—thank heaven ! we were no longer tragic.

Presently I had news for the Sphinx. “The rose-tree that grows in the garden of my mind,” I said, “desires to blossom.”

“May it blossom indeed,” she replied ; “for it has been flowerless all this long evening ; and bring me a rose fresh with all the dews of inspiration—no florist’s flower, wired and artificially scented, no bloom of yesterday’s hard-driven brains.”

“I was only thinking,” I said, “*à propos* of nightingales and roses, that though all the world has heard the song of the nightingale to the rose, only the nightingale has heard the answer of the rose. You know what I mean ?”

“Know what you mean ? Of course that’s always easy enough,” retorted the Sphinx, who knows well how to be hard on me.

“I’m so glad,” I ventured to thrust back ; “for lucidity is the first success of expression : to make others see clearly what we ourselves are struggling to see, believe with all their hearts what we are just daring to hope, is—well, the religion of a literary man ?”

“Yes !

"Yes! it's a pretty idea," said the Sphinx, once more pressing the rose of my thought to her brain; "and indeed it's more than pretty . . ."

"Thank you!" I said humbly.

"Yes, it's *true*—and many a humble little rose will thank you for it. For, your nightingale is a self-advertising bird. He never sings a song without an eye on the critics, sitting up there in their stalls among the stars. He never, or seldom, sings a song for pure love, just because he must sing it or die. Indeed, he has a great fear of death, unless—you will guarantee him immortality. But the rose, the trusting little earth-born rose, that must stay all her life rooted in one spot till some nightingale comes to choose her—some nightingale whose song maybe has been inspired and perfected by a hundred other roses, which are at the moment pot-pourri—ah, the shy bosom-song of the rose . . ."

Here the Sphinx paused, and added abruptly:

"Well—there is no nightingale worthy to hear it!"

"It is true," I agreed, "O trusting, little earth-born rose!"

"Do you know why the rose has thorns?" suddenly asked the Sphinx. Of course I knew; but I always respect a joke, particularly when it is but half-born—humourists always prefer to deliver themselves—so I shook my head.

"To keep off the nightingales, of course," said the Sphinx, the tone of her voice holding in mocking solution the words "Donkey" and "Stupid,"—which I recognised and meekly bore.

"What an excellent idea!" I said. "I never thought of it before. But don't you think it's a little unkind? For, after all, if there were no nightingales, one shouldn't hear so much about the rose; and there is always the danger that if the rose continues too painfully thorny, the nightingale may go off and seek, say, a more accommodating lily."

"I have

"I have no opinion of lilies," said the Sphinx.

"Nor have I," I answered soothingly, "I much prefer roses—
but . . . but . . ."

"But what?"

"But—well, I much prefer roses. Indeed I do."

"Rose of the World," I continued with sentiment, "draw in
your thorns. I cannot bear them."

"Ah!" she answered eagerly, "that is just it. The nightingale
that is worthy of the rose will not only bear, but positively love,
her thorns. It is for that reason she wears them. The thorns of
the rose properly understood are but the tests of the nightingale.
The nightingale that is frightened of the thorns is not worthy of
the rose—of that you may be sure. . . ."

"I am not frightened of the thorns," I managed to interject.

"Sing then once more," she cried, "the Song of the Nightin-
gale."

And it was thus I sang :

"O Rose of the World, a nightingale,
A Bird of the World am I,
I have loved all the world and sung all the world,
But I come to your side to die.

"Tired of the world, as the world of me,
I plead for your quiet breast,
I have loved all the world and sung all the world—
But—where is the nightingale's nest ?

"In a hundred gardens I sung the rose,
Rose of the World, I confess—
But for every rose I have sung before
I love you the more, not less.

"Perfect

“ Perfect it grew by each rose that died,
 Each rose that has died for you,
 The song that I sing—yea, 'tis no new song,
 It is tried—and so it is true.

“ Petal or thorn, yea ! I have no care,
 So that I here abide,
 Pierce me, my love, or kiss me, my love,
 But keep me close to your side.

“ I know not your kiss from your scorn, my love,
 Your breast from your thorn, my rose,
 And if you must kill me, well, kill me, my love,
 But—say 'twas the death I chose.”

“ Is it true ? ” asked the Rose.

“ As I am a nightingale,” I replied ; and as we bade each other good-night, I whispered :

“ When may I expect the Answer of the Rose ? ”

II—Spring by Parcel Post

“ They've taken all the Spring from the country to the town—
 Like the butter and the eggs and the milk from the cow . . . ”

So began to jig and jingle my thoughts as in my letters and newspapers this morning I read, buried alive among the solitary fastnesses of the Surrey hills, the last news from town. The news I envied most was that spring had already reached London. “ Now,” ran a pretty article on spring fashions, “ the sunshine makes bright the streets, and the flower-baskets, like huge bouquets, announce the gay arrival of spring.” I looked up and
 out

out through my hillside window. The black ridge on the other side of the valley stood a grim wall of burnt heather against the sky—which sky, like the bullets in the nursery rhyme, was made unmistakably of lead; a close rain was falling methodically, and, generally speaking, the world looked like a soaked mackintosh. It wasn't much like the gay arrival of spring, and grimly I mused on the advantages of life in town.

Certainly, it did seem hard, I reflected, that town should be ahead of us even in such a country matter as spring. Flower-baskets indeed! Why, we haven't as much as a daisy for miles around. It is true that on the terrace there the crocuses blaze like a street on fire, that the primroses thicken into clumps, lying among their green leaves like pounds of country butter; it is true that the blue cones of the little grape hyacinth are there, quaintly formal as a child's toy-flowers; yes! and the big Dutch hyacinths are already shamelessly *enceinte* with their buxom waxen blooms, so fat and fragrant—(One is already delivered of a fine blossom. Well, that is a fine baby, to be sure! say the other hyacinths, with babes no less bonny under their own green aprons—all waiting for the doctor sun). Then among the blue-green blades of the narcissus, here and there you see a stem topped with a creamish chrysalis-like envelope, from which will soon emerge a beautiful eye, rayed round with white wings, looking as though it were meant to fly, but remaining rooted—a butterfly on a stalk; while all the beds are crowded with indeterminate beak and blade, pushing and elbowing each other for a look at the sun, which, however, sulkily declines to look at them. It is true there is spring on the terrace, but even so it is spring imported from the town—spring bought in Holborn, spring delivered free by parcel post; for where would the terrace have been but for the city seedsman—that magician who sends you strangely spotted beans

and mysterious bulbs in shrivelled cerements, weird little flower-mummies that suggest centuries of forgotten silence in painted Egyptian tombs. This strange and shrivelled thing can surely never live again, we say, as we hold it in our hands, seeing not the glowing circles of colour, tiny rings of Saturn, packed so carefully inside this flower-egg, the folds of green and silver silk wound round and round the precious life within.

But, of course, this is all the seedsman's cunning, and no credit to Nature ; and I repeat that were it not for railways and the parcel post—goodness knows whether we should ever get any spring at all in the country ! Think of the days when it had to travel down by stage-coach. For, left to herself, what is the best Nature can do for you with March well on the way ? Personally, I find the face of the country practically unchanged. It is, to all intents and purposes, the same as it has been for the last three or four months—as grim, as unadorned, as bleak, as draughty, and generally as comfortless as ever. There isn't a flower to be seen, hardly a bird worth listening to, not a tree that is not winter-naked, and not a chair to sit down upon. If you want flowers on your walks you must bring them with you ; songs, you must take a poet under your arm ; and if you want to rest, lean laboriously on your stick—or take your chance of rheumatism.

Of course your specialists, your botanists, your nature detectives, will tell you otherwise. They have surprised a violet in the act of blossoming ; after long and excited chase have discovered a clump of primroses in their wild state ; seen one butterfly, heard one cuckoo. But as one swallow does not make a summer, it takes more than one cuckoo to make a spring. I confess that only yesterday I saw three sulphur butterflies, with my own eyes ; I admit the catkins, and the silver-notched palm ; and I am told on good colour-authority that there is a lovely purplish bloom, almost
like

like plum-bloom, over certain copses in the valley ; by taking thought, I have observed the long horizontal arms of the beech growing spurred with little forked branches of spear-shaped buds, and I see little green nipples pushing out through the wolf-coloured rind of the dwarf fir-trees. Spring is arming in secret to attack the winter—that is sure enough, but spring in secret is no spring for me. I want to see her marching gaily with green pennons, and flashing sun-blades, and a good band.

I want butterflies as they have them at the Lyceum—"butterflies all white," "butterflies all blue," "butterflies of gold," and I should particularly fancy "butterflies all black." But there, again, you see,—you must go to town, within hearing of Mrs. Patrick Campbell's *voix d'or*. I want the meadows thickly inlaid with buttercups and daisies ; I want the trees thick with green leaves, the sky all larks and sunshine ; I want hawthorn and wild roses—both at once ; I want some go, some colour, some warmth in the world. O where are the pipes of Pan ?

The pipes of Pan are in town, playing at street corners and in the centres of crowded circuses, piled high with flower-baskets blazing with refulgent flowery masses of white and gold. Here are the flowers you can only buy in town ; simple flowers enough, but only to be had in town. Here are fragrant banks of violets every few yards, conflagrations of daffodils at every crossing, and narcissus in scented starry garlands for your hair.

You wander through the Strand, or along Regent Street, as through the meadows of Enna—sweet scents, sweet sounds, sweet shapes, are all about you ; the town-butterflies, white, blue, and gold, "wheel and shine" and flutter from shop to shop, suddenly resurgent from their winter wardrobes as from a chrysalis ; bright eyes flash and flirt along the merry, jostling street, while the sun pours out his golden wine overhead, splashing it about from gilded domes

domes and bright-faced windows—and ever are the voices at the corners and the crossings calling out the sweet flower-names of the spring !

But here in the country it is still all rain and iron. I am tired of waiting for this slow-moving provincial spring. Let us to the town to meet the spring—for :

“ They’ve taken all the spring from the country to the town—
 Like the butter and the eggs and the milk from the cow ;
 And if you want a primrose, you write to London now,
 And if you need a nightingale, well—Whiteley sends it down.”

III—About the Securities

WHEN I say that my friend Matthew lay dying, I want you so far as possible to dissociate the statement from any conventional, and certainly from any pictorial, conceptions of death which you may have acquired. Death sometimes shows himself one of those impersonal artists who conceal their art, and, unless you had been told, you could hardly have guessed that Matthew was dying, dying indeed sixty miles an hour, dying of consumption, dying because some one else had died four years before, dying too of debt.

Connoisseurs, of course, would have understood ; at a glance, would have named the sculptor who was silently chiselling those noble hollows in the finely modelled face,—that Pygmalion who turns all flesh to stone,—at a glance would have named the painter who was cunningly weighting the brows with darkness that the eyes might shine the more with an unaccustomed light. Matthew and I had long been students of the strange wandering artist, had
 begun

begun by hating his art (it is ever so with an art unfamiliar to us!) and had ended by loving it.

"Let us see what the artist has added to the picture since yesterday," said Matthew, signing to me to hand him the mirror.

"H'm," he murmured, "he's had one of his lazy days, I'm afraid. He's hardly added a touch—just a little heightened the *chiaroscuro*, sharpened the nose a trifle, deepened some little the shadows round the eyes"

"O why," he presently sighed, "does he not work a little overtime and get it done? He's been paid handsomely enough"

"Paid," he continued, "by a life that is so much undeveloped gold-mine, paid by all my uncashed hopes and dreams"

"He works fast enough for me, old fellow," I interrupted, "there was a time, was there not, when he worked too fast for you and me?"

There are moments, for certain people, when such fantastic unreality as this is the truest realism. Matthew and I talked like this with our brains, because we hadn't the courage to allow our hearts to break in upon the conversation. Had I dared to say some real emotional thing, what effect would it have had but to set poor tired Matthew a-coughing? and it was our aim that he should die with as little to-do as practicable. The emotional in such situations is merely the obvious. There was no need for either of us to state the elementary feelings of our love. I knew that Matthew was going to die, and he knew that—I was going to live; and we pitied each other accordingly, though I confess my feeling for him was rather one of envy,—when it was not congratulation.

Thus, to tell the truth, we never mentioned "the hereafter." I don't believe it even occurred to us. Indeed, we spent the few hours that remained of our friendship in retailing the latest gathered
of

of those good stories with which we had been accustomed to salt our intercourse.

One of Matthew's anecdotes was, no doubt, somewhat suggested by the occasion, and I should add that he had always somewhat of an ecclesiastical bias, would, I believe, have ended some day as a Monsignor, a notable "Bishop Blougram."

His story was of an evangelistic preacher who desired to impress his congregation with the unmistakable reality of hell-fire. "You know the Black Country, my friends," he had declaimed, "you have seen it, at night, flaring with a thousand furnaces, in the lurid incandescence of which, myriads of unhappy beings, our fellow-creatures (God forbid!) snatch a precarious existence, you have seen them silhouetted against the yellow glare, running hither and thither as it seemed from afar, in the very jaws of the awful fire. Have you realised that the burdens with which they thus run hither and thither are molten iron, iron to which such a stupendous heat has been applied that it has melted, melted as though it had been sugar in the sun—well! returning to hell-fire, let me tell you this, that in hell they eat this fiery molten metal for ice-cream, yes! and are glad to get anything so cool."

It was thus we talked while Matthew lay dying, for why should we not talk as we had lived? We both laughed long and heartily over this story, perhaps it would have amused us less had Matthew not been dying; and then his kind old nurse brought in our lunch. We had both excellent appetites, and were far from indifferent to the dainty little meal which was to be our last but one together. I brought my table as close to Matthew's pillow as was possible, and he stroked my hand with tenderness in which there was a touch of gratitude.

"You are not frightened of the bacteria!" he laughed sadly, and then he told me, with huge amusement, how a friend (and a true

true dear friend for all that) had come to see him a day or two before, and had hung over the end of the bed to say farewell, daring to approach no nearer, mopping his fear-perspiring brows with a handkerchief soaked in "Eucalyptus"!

"He had brought an anticipatory elegy too," said my friend, "written against my burial. I wish you'd read it for me" and he fidgetted for it in the nervous manner of the dying, and, finding it among his pillows, handed it to me saying, "you needn't be frightened of it. It is well dosed with Eucalyptus."

We laughed even more over this poem than over our stories, and then we discussed the terms of three cremation societies to which, at the express request of my friend, I had written a day or two before.

Then having smoked a cigar and drunk a glass of port together (for the assured dying are allowed to "live well"), Matthew grew sleepy, and tucking him beneath the counterpane, I left him, for after all, he was not to die that day.

Circumstances prevented my seeing him again for a week. When I did so, entering the room poignantly redolent of the strange sweet odour of antiseptics, I saw that the great artist had been busy in my absence. Indeed, his work was nearly at end. Yet to one unfamiliar with his methods, there was still little to alarm in Matthew's face. In fact, with the exception of his brain, and his ice-cold feet, he was alive as ever. And even to his brain had come a certain unnatural activity, a life as of the grave, a sort of vampire vitality, which would assuredly have deceived any one who had not known him. He still told his stories, laughed and talked with the same unconquerable humour, was in every way alert and practical, with this difference that he had forgotten he was going to die, and that the world in which he exercised his various faculties was another world to that in which, in spite of his delirium,

delirium, we ate our last boiled fowl, drank our last wine, smoked our last cigar together. His talk was so convincingly rational, dealt with such unreal matters in so every day a fashion that you were ready to think that surely it was you and not he whose mind was wandering.

"You might reach that pocket-book, and ring for Mrs. Davies," he would say in so casual a way that of course you would ring. On Mrs. Davies's appearance he would be fumbling about among the papers in his pocket-book, and presently he would say, with a look of frustration that went to one's heart—"I've got a ten pound note somewhere here for you, Mrs. Davies, to pay you up till Saturday, but somehow I seem to have lost it. Yet it must be somewhere about. Perhaps you'll find it as you make the bed in the morning. I'm so sorry to have troubled you. . . ."

And then he would grow tired and doze a little on his pillow.

Suddenly he would be alert again and with a startling vividness tell me strange stories from the dreamland into which he was now passing.

I had promised to see him on the Monday, but had been prevented, and had wired to him accordingly. This was Tuesday.

"You needn't have troubled to wire," he said. "Didn't you know I was in London from Saturday to Monday?"

"The doctor and Mrs. Davies didn't know," he continued with the creepy cunning of the dying, "I managed to slip away to look at a house I think of taking—in fact I've taken it. It's in—in—now, where is it? Now isn't that silly? I can see it as plain as anything—yet I cannot, for the life of me, remember where it is, or the number. . . . It was somewhere St. John's Wood way . . . never mind, you must come and see me there, when we get in. . . ."

I said that he was dying in debt, and thus the heaven that lay
about

about his deathbed was one of fantastic Eldorados, sudden colossal legacies, and miraculous windfalls.

"I haven't told you," he said presently, "of the piece of good luck that has befallen me. You are not the only person in luck. I can hardly expect you to believe me, it sounds so like the Arabian nights. However, it's true for all that. Well, one of the little sisters was playing in the garden a few afternoons ago, making mud-pies or something of that sort, and she suddenly scraped up a sovereign. Presently she found two or three more, and our curiosity becoming aroused, a turn or two with the spade revealed quite a bed of gold, and the end of it was that on further excavating, the whole garden proved to be one mass of sovereigns. Sixty thousand pounds we counted . . . and then what do you think—it suddenly melted away . . ."

He paused for a moment, and continued more in amusement than regret :

"Yes—the government got wind of it, and claimed the whole lot as treasure-trove !"

"But not," he added slyly, "before I'd paid off two or three of my biggest bills. Yes—and—you'll keep it quiet, of course, there's another lot been discovered in the garden, but we shall take good care the government doesn't get hold of it this time, you may bet."

He told this wild story with such an air of simple conviction that, odd as it may seem, one believed every word of it. But the tale of his sudden good fortune was not ended.

"You've heard of old Lord Osterley," he presently began again. "Well, congratulate me, old man, he has just died and left everything to me. You know what a splendid library he had—to think that that will all be mine—and that grand old park through which we've so often wandered, you and I. Well, we shall need fear no gamekeeper

gamekeeper now, and of course, dear old fellow, you'll come and live with me—like a prince—and just write your own books and say farewell to journalism for ever. Of course I can hardly believe it's true yet. It seems too much of a dream, and yet there's no doubt about it. I had a letter from my solicitors this morning, saying that they were engaged in going through the securities and—and—but the letter's somewhere over there, you might read it. No? can't you find it? It's there somewhere about I know. Never mind, you can see it again" he finished wearily.

"Yes!" he presently said, half to himself, "it will be a wonderful change! a wonderful change!"

At length the time came to say good-bye, a good-bye I knew must be the last, for my affairs were taking me so far away from him that I could not hope to see him for some days.

"I'm afraid, old man," I said, "that I mayn't be able to see you for another week."

"O never mind, old fellow, don't worry about me. I'm much better now—and by the time you come again we shall know all about the securities."

The securities! My heart had seemed like a stone, incapable of feeling, all those last unreal hours together, but the pathos of that sad phrase, so curiously symbolic, suddenly smote it with overwhelming pity, and the tears sprang to my eyes for the first time.

As I bent over him to kiss his poor damp forehead, and press his hand for the last farewell, I murmured:

"Yes—dear, dear old friend. We shall know all about the securities"

“THAT

IV—The Donkey that Loved a Star

“THAT is how the donkey tells his love!” I said one day, with intent to be funny, as the prolonged love-whoop of a distant donkey was heard in the land.

“Don’t be too ready to laugh at donkeys,” said my friend. “For,” he continued, “even donkeys have their dreams. Perhaps, indeed, the most beautiful dreams are dreamed by donkeys.”

“Indeed,” I said, “and now that I think of it, I remember to have said that most dreamers are donkeys, though I never expected so scientific a corroboration of a fleeting jest.”

Now my friend is an eminent scientist and poet in one, a serious combination, and he took my remarks with seriousness at once scientific and poetic.

“Yes,” he went on, “that is where you clever people make a mistake. You think that because a donkey has only two vowel-sounds wherewith to express his emotions, he has no emotions to express. But let me tell you, sir”

But here we both burst out laughing.

“You Golden Ass!” I said, “take a munch of these roses, perhaps they will restore you.”

“No,” he resumed, “I am quite serious. I have for many years past made a study of donkeys—high-stepping critics call it the study of Human Nature—however, it’s the same thing—and I must say that the more I study them the more I love them. There is nothing so well worth studying as the misunderstood, for the very reason that everybody thinks he understands it. Now, to take another instance, most people think they have said the last word on a goose when they have called it ‘a goose!’—but let me tell you, sir”

But

But here again we burst out laughing.

"Dear goose of the golden eggs," I said, "pray leave to discourse on geese to-night—though lovely and pleasant would the discourse be—to-night I am all agog for donkeys."

"So be it," said my friend, "and if that be so, I cannot do better than tell you the story of the donkey that loved a star—keeping for another day the no less fascinating story of the goose that loved an angel."

By this time I was, appropriately, all ears.

"Well," he once more began, "there was once a donkey, quite an intimate friend of mine, and I have no friend of whom I am prouder, who was unpractically fond of looking up at the stars. He could go a whole day without thistles, if night would only bring him stars. Of course he suffered no little from his fellow-donkeys for this curious passion of his. They said well that it did not become him, for indeed it was no little laughable to see him gazing so sentimentally at the remote and pitiless heavens. Donkeys who belonged to Shakespeare Societies recalled the fate of Bottom, the donkey who had loved a fairy, but our donkey paid little heed. There is perhaps only one advantage in being a donkey—namely, a hide impervious to criticism. In our donkey's case it was rather a dream that made him forget his hide—a dream that drew up all the sensitiveness from every part, from hoof, and hide, and ears, so that all the feeling in his whole body was centred in his eyes and brain, and those, as we have said, were centred on a star. He took it for granted that his fellows should sneer and kick-out at him, it was ever so with genius among the donkeys, and he had very soon grown used to these attentions of his brethren, which were powerless to withdraw his gaze from the star he loved. For though he loved all the stars, as every individual man loves all women, there was one star he loved more than
any

any other; and standing one midnight among his thistles, he prayed a prayer, a prayer that some day it might be granted him to carry that star upon his back—which, he recalled, had been sanctified by the holy sign—were it but for ever so short a journey. Just to carry it a little way, and then to die. This to him was a dream beyond the dreams of donkeys.

“Now, one night,” continued my friend, taking breath for himself and me, “our poor donkey looked up to the sky, and lo! the star was nowhere to be seen. He had heard it said that stars sometimes fall. Evidently his star had fallen. Fallen! but what if it had fallen upon the earth? Being a donkey, the wildest dreams seemed possible to him. And, strange as it may seem, there came a day when a poet came to his master and bought our donkey to carry his little child. Now, the very first day he had her upon his back, the donkey knew that his prayer had been answered, and that the little swaddled babe he carried was the star he had prayed for. And, indeed, so it was, for so long as donkeys ask no more than to fetch and carry for their beloved, they may be sure of beauty upon their backs. Now, so long as this little girl that was a star remained a little girl, our donkey was happy. For many pretty years she would kiss his ugly muzzle and feed his mouth with sugar—and thus our donkey’s thoughts sweetened day by day, till from a natural pessimist he blossomed into a perfectly absurd optimist, and dreamed the donkiest of dreams. But one day, as he carried the girl who was really a star through the spring lanes, a young man walked beside her, and though our donkey thought very little of his talk—in fact, felt his plain ‘hee-haw’ to be worth all its smart chirping and twittering—yet it evidently pleased the maiden. It included quite a number of vowel-sounds, though if the maiden had only known, it didn’t mean half so much as the donkey’s plain monotonous declaration.

“Well,

“Well, our donkey soon began to realise that his dream was nearing its end; and, indeed, one day his little mistress came bringing him the sweetest of kisses, the very best sugar in the very best shops, but for all that our donkey knew that it meant good-bye. It is the charming manner of English girls to be at their sweetest when they say good-bye.

“Our dreamer-donkey went into exile as servant to a woodcutter, and his life was lenient if dull, for the woodcutter had no sticks to waste upon his back; and next day his young mistress who was once a star took a pony for her love, whom some time after she discarded for a talented hunter, and, one fine day, like many of her sex, she pitched her affections upon a man—he too being a talented hunter. To their wedding came all the countryside. And with the countryside came a donkey. He carried a great bundle of firewood for the servants’ hall, and as he waited outside, gazing up at his old loves the stars, while his master drank deeper and deeper within, he revolved many thoughts. But he is only known to have made one remark—in the nature, one may think, or a grim jest.

“‘After all!’ he was heard to say, ‘she has married a donkey, after all.’

“No doubt it was feeble; but then our donkey was growing old and bitter, and hope deferred had made him a cynic.”