

Anstey F.

In Brief Authority



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To

Peggy

AUTHOR'S NOTE

It may be as well to mention here that the whole of this book was planned, and at least three-fourths of it actually written, in those happy days, which now seem so pathetically distant, when we were still at peace – days when, to all but a very few, so hideous a calamity as a World-War seemed a danger that had passed for the present, and might never recur; when even those few could hardly have foreseen that England would be so soon compelled to fight for her very existence against the most efficient and deadly foe it has ever been her lot to encounter.

But, as the central idea of this story happens to be inseparably connected with certain characters and incidents of German origin, I have left them unaltered – partly because it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to substitute any others, but mainly because I cannot bring myself to believe that the nursery friends of our youth could ever be regarded as enemies.

F. ANSTEY.

September 1915.

CHAPTER I

"THE SKIRTS OF HAPPY CHANCE"

On a certain afternoon in March Mrs. Sidney Stimpson (or rather Mrs. Sidney Wibberley-Stimpson, as a recent legacy from a distant relative had provided her with an excuse for styling herself) was sitting alone in her drawing-room at "Inglegarth," Gablehurst.

"Inglegarth" was the name she had chosen for the house on coming to live there some years before. What it exactly meant she could not have explained, but it sounded distinguished and out of the common, without being reprehensibly eccentric. Hence the choice.

Some one, she was aware, had just entered the carriage-drive, and after having rung, was now standing under the white "Queen Anne" porch; Mitchell, the rosy-cheeked and still half-trained parlour-maid, was audible in the act of "answering the door."

It being neither a First nor a Third Friday, Mrs. Stimpson was not, strictly speaking, "at home" except to very intimate friends, though she made a point of being always presentable enough to see any afternoon caller. On this occasion she was engaged in no more absorbing occupation than the study of one of the less expensive Society journals, and, having already read all that was of real interest in its columns, she was inclined to welcome a distraction.

"If you please, m'm," said Mitchell, entering, "there's a lady wishes to know if she could see you for a minute or two."

"Did you ask her to state her business, Mitchell?.. No? Then you should have. Called for a subscription to something, I expect. Tell her I am particularly engaged. I suppose she didn't give any name?"

"Oh yes, m'm. She give her name – Lady 'Arriet Elmslie, it was."

"Then why on earth didn't you say so before," cried the justly exasperated Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "instead of leaving her ladyship on the door-mat all this time? Really, Mitchell, you are *too* trying! Go and show her in at once – and be careful to say 'my lady.' And bring up tea for two as soon as you can – the *silver* tea-pot, mind!"

It might have been inferred from her manner that she and Lady Harriet were on terms of closest friendship, but this was not exactly the case. Mrs. Stimpson had indeed known her for a considerable time, but only by sight, and she had long ceased to consider a visit from Lady Harriet as even a possible event. Now it had actually happened, and, providentially, on an afternoon when Mitchell's cap and apron could defy inspection. But if it was the first time that an Earl's daughter had crossed Mrs. Stimpson's threshold, she was not at all the woman to allow the fact to deprive her of her self-possession.

A title had no terror for *her*. Before her marriage, when she was Miss Selina Prinsley, she had acted as hostess for her father, the great financier and company promoter, who had entertained lavishly up to the date of his third and final failure. Her circle then had included many who could boast of knighthoods, and even baronetcies!

And, though Lady Harriet was something of a personage at Gablehurst, and confined her acquaintance to her own particular set, there was nothing formidable or even imposing in her appearance. She was the widow of a Colonel Elmslie, and apparently left with only moderate means, judging from the almost poky house on the farther side of the Common, which she shared with an unmarried female cousin of about her own age.

So, when she was shown in, looking quite ordinary, and even a little shy, Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson rose to receive her with perfect ease, being supported by the consciousness that she was by far the more handsomely dressed of the two. In fact her greeting was so gracious as to be rather overpowering.

"Interrupting me? Not in the very *least*, dear Lady Harriet! Only too delighted, I'm sure!.. Now *do* take off your boa, and come nearer the fire. You'll find this *quite* a comfy chair, I think. Tea will be brought in presently... Oh, you really *must*, after trapesing all that way across the Common. I can't *tell* you how pleased I am to see you. I've so often wished to make your acquaintance, but I couldn't take the first step, could I? *So* nice of you to break the ice!"

Lady Harriet submitted to these rather effusive attentions resignedly enough. She could hardly interrupt her hostess's flow of conversation without rudeness, while she had already begun to suspect that Mrs. Stimpson might form an entertaining study.

But her chief reason, after all, was that the prospect of tea had its attractions. Accordingly she attempted no further explanations of her visit just then, and was content to observe Mrs. Stimpson, while she rippled on complacently.

She saw a matron who might be about fifty, with abundant pale auburn hair, piled up, and framing her face in a sort of half aureole. The eyes were small and hazel green; the nose narrow and pointed, the wide, full-lipped mouth, which wore just then a lusciously ingratiating smile, showed white but prominent teeth. The complexion was of a uniform oatmeal tint, and, though Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson was neither tall nor slim, she seemed to have taken some pains to preserve a waist.

"Most fortunate I happened to be at home," she was saying. "And if you had called on one of my *regular* days, I shouldn't have had the chance of a *real* talk with you. As it is, we shall be quite *tête-à-tête*... Ah, here *is* tea – you must tell me if you like it weak, dear Lady Harriet, and I shall remember the *next* time you come. Yes, you find me all alone this afternoon. My eldest daughter, Edna, has gone to a lecture at her Mutual Improvement Society, on a German Philosopher called Nitchy, or some such name. She's so bookish and well-read, takes such an interest in all the latest movements – runs up to town for *matinées* of intellectual dramas – *quite* the modern type of girl. But not a blue-stocking – she's joined a Tango Class lately, and dances most beautifully, I'm told – just the figure for it. We got up a little Costume Ball here this winter – perhaps you may have heard of it? – Ah, well, my Edna was generally admitted to be the *belle* of the evening. A perfect Juliet, everybody said. I went as her mother – Lady Capulet, you know. I *did* think of going as Queen Elizabeth at one time. I've so often been told that if I ever went to a Fancy Dress Ball, I ought to go as her – or at all events as *one* of our English Queens. But, however, I didn't. Mr. Stimpson went as a Venetian Doge, but I do *not* consider myself that it was at all suitable to him."

She did not say all this without a motive. She knew that a local Historical Pageant was being arranged for the coming Summer, and that Lady Harriet was on the Committee. Also she had heard that, after rehearsals had begun, some of the principal performers had resigned their parts, and the Committee had some difficulty in finding substitutes.

It had struck her as not at all unlikely that her visitor had called with a view to ascertaining whether the services of any of the Stimpson household would be available. If she had, it was, of course very gratifying. If she had merely come in a neighbourly way, there was no harm in directing her attention to the family qualifications for a Pageant performance.

Her hearer, without betraying any sign of the mirth she inwardly felt, meekly agreed that Mrs. Stimpson was undoubtedly well fitted to impersonate a Queen, and that the costume of a Venetian Doge was rather a trying one, after which her hostess proceeded: "Perhaps you are right, dear Lady Harriet, but the worst of it was that my boy Clarence, who would have made such a handsome Romeo, insisted on going as a *Pierrot*! Very likely you have seen Clarence?... Oh, you would certainly have noticed him if you had – always so well turned out. He's got quite a good post as Secretary to an Insurance Co., in the City: they think so highly of him there – take his advice on everything – in fact, he practically *is* the Company! And only twenty-two! It's *such* a relief, because there *was* a time when it really seemed as if he'd never settle down to any regular work. Nothing would induce him to enter my husband's business – for I must tell you, Lady Harriet, we

are in business. Sauces, pickles, condiments of every sort and description —*wholesale*, you know, *not* retail, so I hope you aren't *too* dreadfully shocked!"

Lady Harriet remarked that she saw nothing to be shocked at – several of her relations and friends were in business of various kinds, which gave Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson the opening she required. "Society has changed its views so *much* lately, has it not?" she said. "Why, the youngest partner in Mr. Wibberley-Stimpson's firm is a younger son of the Earl of Fallowfields – Mr. Chervil Thistleton, and an Honourable, of *course*! I daresay you are acquainted with him?.. Not? Quite a charming young man – married a Miss Succory, a connection of the Restharrows, and such a sweet girl! You may have met her?.. Oh, I thought – but I really hardly know her *myself* yet," (which was Mrs. Stimpson's method of disguising the fact that she had never met either of them in her life). "When he came into the warehouse he was perfectly amazed at the immense variety in pickles and sauces – it was quite a revelation to him. Only he can't *touch* pickles of any kind, which is a pity, because it prevents him from taking the interest he might in the business... Just *one* of these hot cakes, dear Lady Harriet – you're making such a wretched tea!.. I should like you to see my youngest child, Ruby. She's gone out to tea with some little friends of hers, but she may be back before you go. So much admired – such lovely colouring! But just a *little* difficult to manage. Governess after governess have I had, and none of them could do anything with her. My present one, however, she seems to have taken to. Miss Heritage, her name is – at least she was adopted as a baby by a rich widow of that name, and brought up in every luxury. But Mrs. Heritage died without making a will, and it seems she'd muddled away most of her money, and there were claims on what she left, so the poor girl had to turn out, and earn her own living. Such a sad little story, is it not? I felt it was really a charity to engage her. I'm not sure that I can keep her much longer, though. She's far too good-looking for a governess, and there's always a danger with a marriageable young man in the house, but fortunately Clarence has too much sense and principle to marry out of his own rank. I do think that's *such* a mistake, don't you, dear Lady Harriet? Look at the Duke of Mountravail's heir, the young Marquis of Muscombe – married only last month at a registry office to a girl who was in the chorus at the Vivacity! I hear she comes of quite a respectable family, and all that," admitted Mrs. Stimpson, who derived her information from her Society journals. "But still, can you *wonder* at the poor Duke and Duchess being upset by it? I've no doubt you are constantly coming across similar instances in Smart Society."

Lady Harriet disclaimed all acquaintanceship with Smart Society, which Mrs. Stimpson protested she could not believe. "I am sure you have the *entrée* into *any* set, Lady Harriet, even the smartest! Which reminds me. *Have* you heard anything more about that mysterious disappearance of the Dowager Duchess of Gleneagle's diamonds during her journey from the North last week? A tiara, *and* a dog-collar, I was told. Professional thieves, I suppose, but don't you think the Duchess's maid? – Oh, *really*? I made *sure* you would be a friend of the Duchess's – but, of course, Society is so much larger than it used to be!"

"You are a far better authority than I can pretend to be about it," Lady Harriet owned smilingly; "and really you've given me so much interesting information that I had nearly forgotten what I came to see you about. It's – well, I wanted to ask – "

"I think I can *guess*, Lady Harriet," put in Mrs. Stimpson, as her visitor paused for a second. "I've heard of your difficulties about getting players for the Pageant, and I'm sure I, and indeed *all* the family, would feel only too honoured."

"It's most kind of you," Lady Harriet interrupted, rising, "but – but that isn't why I've troubled you. It's only that I'm thinking of engaging Jane Saunders as house-parlourmaid, and she tells me she was in your service, so I called to ask about her character, don't you know."

For a moment Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson wished she had been less precipitate, but she soon recognised that no real harm had been done. "Saunders?" she said, "yes, she left me last month. Do sit down again, dear Lady Harriet, and I'll give you all the information I possibly can. Well, when

that girl first came, she had everything to learn. It was quite evident she'd never been in service before with gentlefolks. Actually brought in letters in her *fingers*, Lady Harriet, and knocked at sitting-room doors! And *no* notion of cleaning silver, and I like to see mine come up to table without a speck! However, after being with me for a while, she improved, and I can conscientiously say that she became quite competent in time. That is, for a household like *ours*, you know, where things are done in quite an unpretentious style."

"I don't think we are at all pretentious people either," said Lady Harriet, rising once more. "And now, Mrs. Stimpson, you have told me all I wanted to know, so I must tear myself away."

"Must you *really* be going? Well, Lady Harriet, I've *so* much enjoyed our little chat. There are so few persons in a semi-suburban neighbourhood like this, with whom one can have anything in common. So I shall hope to see more of you in future. And if," she added, after ringing for Mitchell, "I *should* find I've forgotten anything I ought to have told you about Saunders, I can easily pop in some morning." Lady Harriet hastened to assure her that she must not think of giving herself this trouble – after which she took her leave.

"Rather an amusing experience in its way," she was thinking. "Something to tell Joan when I get back. But oh! *what* an appalling woman! She's settled *one* thing, though. It will be quite impossible to take Jane Saunders *now*. A pity – because I rather liked the girl's looks!"

Meanwhile the happily unconscious Mrs. Stimpson had settled down in her chair again with the conviction that she had made a distinctly favourable impression. She allowed her eyes to wander complacently round the room, which, with its big bay window looking on the semi-circular gravel sweep, and its glazed door by the fireplace leading through a small conservatory, gay with begonias, asters, and petunias to the garden beyond, was not merely large, by Gablehurst standards, but undeniably pleasant. She regarded its various features – the white chimney-piece and over-mantel with Adam decorations in *Cartonpierre*, the silk fire-screen printed with Japanese photographs, the cottage-grand, on which stood a tall trumpet vase filled with branches of imitation peach blossom, the *étagères* ("Louis Quinze style") containing china which could not be told from genuine Dresden at a distance, the gaily patterned chintz on the couches and chairs, the water-colour sketches of Venice, and coloured terra-cotta plaques embossed on high relief with views of the Forum and St. Peter's at Rome on the walls, and numerous "nick-nacks" – an alabaster model of the Leaning Tower of Pisa, a wood carving of the Lion of Lucerne, and groups of bears from Berne – all of which were not only souvenirs of her wedding-journey, but witnesses to Continental travel and general culture.

She could see nothing that was not in the most correct taste, as Lady Harriet must have observed for herself, together with the hammered copper gong, the oak chest, and the china bowl for cards in the hall. Strange that Saunders should have been the humble means of bringing about so unexpected a meeting, but Providence chose its own instruments, and now the seed was sown, Mrs. Stimpson felt she could rely on herself for the harvest.

And so she took up the latest number of *The Upper Circle*, and read, to the accompaniment of alternate duologues and soliloquies by thrushes and blackbirds in the garden, until gradually she drifted into a blissful dream of being at a garden-party at Lady Harriet's and entreated, not merely by her hostess, but Royalty itself, to accept the *rôle* of Queen at the County Pageant!

She was in the act of doing this gracefully, when the vision was abruptly ended by the entrance of her elder daughter. Edna was by no means bad-looking, in spite of her light eyelashes and eyebrows, and the fact that the *pince-nez* she wore compressed her small nose in an unbecoming ridge. Her eyes were larger than her mother's, though of the same colour, and her hair was of a deeper shade of auburn. Her costume was of a kind that may be described as the floppily artistic.

"I never heard you come in, my dear," said her mother. "Did you enjoy your lecture?"

"Quite; I took pages and pages of notes. Nietzsche's *Gospel of the Superman* is certainly most striking."

"And *what* is his Gospel exactly?"

"Oh, well, he teaches that the ideal man ought to rise superior to conventional prejudices, and have the courage to do as he thinks right without deferring to ordinary ideas. To be strong in willing what he wants – all that sort of thing, you know."

"Dear me!" said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson dubiously. "But, if everybody acted like that, would it be quite – er – nice?"

"There's no fear of any of the men in Gablehurst being Supermen, at all events!" said Edna. "They're all perfect slaves to convention! But the lecturer explained the Nietzschean theories in such a way that he made us feel there was a great deal to be said for them... No tea, thanks. I had mine at the Fletchers. It looks," she added, with a glance at the tea-cups, "as if you had been entertaining some one, Mother – who was it?"

"Only Lady Harriet," replied Mrs. Stimpson, with elaborate carelessness.

"*What* Lady Harriet?" was the intentionally provoking query.

"Really, Edna, one would think there were dozens of them! *The* Lady Harriet: Lady Harriet Elmslie, of course."

"Oh," said Edna. "And what did *she* want?"

"Well, she *came* to ask after Saunders' character, but she stayed to tea, and we really struck up quite an intimate friendship, discussing one thing and another. She's so quiet and unassuming, Edna – absolutely no *hauteur*. I'm sure you will like her. I told her about you all, and she seemed *so* interested. Quite between ourselves, I shouldn't be at all surprised if she got us invited to take part in the Pageant – she's on the Committee, you know."

"If I *was* invited, Mother, I'm not at all sure I shouldn't refuse."

"You must please yourself about that, my dear," said Mrs. Stimpson, who, perhaps, felt but little anxiety as to the result. "*I* shall certainly accept if the part is at all suitable."

She might have said more, if Ruby had not suddenly burst into the room. Ruby was certainly the flower of the family – an extremely engaging young person of about ten, whose mischievous golden-brown eyes had long and curling lashes, and whose vivacious face was set off by a thick mane of deepest Titian red.

"Oh, Mummy," she announced breathlessly, "I've got invitations for nearly all my animals while we're away at Eastbourne! Mucius Scævola's the most popular – everybody asked him, but I think he'll feel *most* at home with Daisy Williams. Vivian and Ada Porter will simply love to have Numa Pompilius, but nobody seems to want Tarquinius Superbus, so I shall turn him out in the garden, and he must catch worms for himself."

"Dearest child," said her mother, "what are these new animals of yours with the extraordinary names?"

"They're the same old animals, Mums. I've rechristened them since I began Roman History with Miss Heritage. Mucius Scævola's the Salamander, because they're indifferent to fire, like he was – though Miss Heritage says it wouldn't be kind to try with Mucius. Numa Pompilius is the Blind-worm – he used to be Kaa – and the Toad has changed from Nobbles to Tarquinius Superbus."

"I can't understand how you can keep such unpleasant pets as reptiles," said Edna.

"Because I like them," said Ruby simply. "And Bobby Williams has promised, as soon as it gets warmer, to come out on the Common with me and catch lizards. *Won't* it be lovely?"

"I hope you won't put one of them down anybody's neck, then, as you did to Tommy Fletcher."

"That was Mucius," Ruby admitted cheerfully. "But I didn't mean him to go so far down. And he was very good – he didn't bite Tommy anywhere."

"Little ladies don't play such tricks," said her Mother. "I hope Miss Heritage doesn't encourage your liking for these horrid creatures?"

"Oh, she doesn't mind, so long as I don't take them out of the aquarium, but she hates touching them herself."

"Did she come in with you?" her mother inquired, and was told that Miss Heritage had done so, and had gone upstairs, whereupon Ruby was ordered to go and take off her things, and stay quietly in the schoolroom till it was time to come down.

"I don't know if you noticed it, Mother," Edna began, as soon as Ruby had consented to leave them, "but Miss Heritage had a letter by the afternoon post which seemed to upset her. I went rather out of my way to ask her if she had had bad news of any kind, but she did not think proper to take me into her confidence. Perhaps she might be more open with *you*."

"My dear," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, with much dignity, "I take no interest whatever in Miss Heritage's private correspondence."

"Nor I," declared Edna. "I only thought that if she is in any trouble – She's so secretive, you know, Mums. I've tried more than once to get her to tell me what cosmetic she uses for her hands – and she never will own to using any at all!"

"I'm sure, Edna, you've no reason to be ashamed of your hands."

"Oh, they look all right just now," said Edna, examining them dispassionately. "But they *will* turn lobster colour at the most inconvenient times. Hers never do – and it *does* seem so unfair, considering –" She broke off here, as Daphne Heritage entered.

"Well, Miss Heritage?" said Mrs. Stimpson, as the girl hesitated on seeing Edna. "Did you wish to speak to me?"

"I did rather want your advice about something," said Daphne, who had a paper, and a small leather case in her hands; "I thought I might find you alone. It doesn't matter – it will do quite well another time."

"Don't let *me* prevent you, Miss Heritage," said Edna. "If you don't wish to speak to Mother before me, I've no desire to remain. I was just going up to change in any case."

She went out with a slightly huffy air, which was not entirely due to baffled curiosity, for she admired Daphne enough to resent being quietly kept at a distance.

"It's about this," explained Daphne, after Edna had made her exit – "a bill that has just been sent on to me." She gave the paper to Mrs. Stimpson as she spoke. "I don't know quite what to do about it."

She looked very young and inexperienced as she stood there, a slim girlish figure with masses of burnished hair the colour of ripe corn, braided and coiled as closely as possible round her small head, but there was no trace of timidity or subservience in her manner. In the slight form, with the milk-white skin, delicate profile and exquisite hands, there was a distinction that struck her employer as quite absurdly out of keeping with her position.

"The only thing to do about a bill, my dear," said Mrs. Stimpson, "is to pay it. But nearly thirty pounds is a large sum for you to owe your milliner."

"It's for things Mother – my adopted mother, you know – ordered for me. Stéphanie was always told to send in the account to her. But this seems to have been overlooked, and the executors have sent it on to me. Only I can't pay it myself – unless you wouldn't mind advancing me the money out of my salary."

"I couldn't possibly. You forget that it would represent over a year's salary, and it's by no means certain that you will be with me so long."

"I was afraid you wouldn't," said Daphne, with a little droop at the corners of her extremely pretty mouth. "So I brought this to show you." She held out the leather case. "It's the only jewellery I've got. It belonged to my father, I believe; he and my real mother both died when I was a baby, you know – and I never meant to part with it. But now I'm afraid I must – that is, if you think any jeweller would give as much as thirty pounds for it."

Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson opened the case, which was much more modern than the kind of badge or pendant it contained. This was a fairly large oval stone of a milky green, deeply engraved with strangely formed letters interlaced in a cypher, and surrounded by a border of dark blue

gems which Mrs. Stimpson decided instantly must be Cabochon star sapphires of quite exceptional quality. The gold chain attached to it was antique and of fine and curious workmanship.

She was convinced that the pendant must be worth considerably more than thirty pounds, though she was no doubt right in telling Daphne that no jeweller would offer so much for an ornament that was quite out of fashion. "Besides," she said, "I don't like the idea of any governess of mine going about offering jewellery for sale. Have Edna or Ruby seen you wearing this thing?" she asked with apparent irrelevance.

It appeared they had not; Daphne had never worn it herself, and she had only remembered its existence that afternoon, and found it hidden away at the back of her wardrobe.

"Well," said Mrs. Stimpson, "it is most unpleasant to me to see a young girl like you owing all this money to her milliner."

"It isn't very pleasant for *me*," said Daphne ruefully; "but if you won't advance the money, and I can't or mustn't sell the pendant, I don't very well see how I can help it."

"I'll tell you what I'll do," said Mrs. Stimpson. "I really *oughtn't* to – and under ordinary circumstances I couldn't afford it, but, as it happens, a great-uncle of mine left me a small legacy not long ago, and I haven't spent quite all of it yet. So I don't mind buying this for thirty pounds myself."

"Will you really?" cried Daphne. "How angelic of you!"

"I think it is," said Mrs. Stimpson; "but I feel myself responsible for you, to some extent. So I'll write you a cheque for the thirty pounds, and you can send it off to this milliner person at once." She went to the writing-table and filled up the cheque. "There," she said, handing it to Daphne, "put it in an envelope and direct it at once – you'll find a stamp in that box, and it can go by the next post."

"By the way, my dear," she added, as she was leaving the room, "I needn't tell you that *I* shall not breathe a word to a soul of our little transaction, and I should advise you, in your own interests, to keep it entirely to yourself."

"I was quite wrong about Mrs. Stimpson," Daphne told herself reproachfully, after she had slipped the letter containing bill and cheque into the letter-box in the hall. "She *can* be kind sometimes, and I've been a little beast to see only the comic side of her! I daresay she won't even *wear* that pendant."

But Mrs. Stimpson had every intention of wearing it that same evening. It is not often that one has the opportunity of doing a kindness and securing a real bargain at a single stroke; and she knew enough about jewels to be fully aware that, if the ornament was a trifle old-fashioned, she had not done at all badly over her purchase.

"It really suits me very well," she thought, as, after putting the last touches to her evening demi-toilette, she fastened the pendant round her neck. "Even better than I expected. It was lucky Miss Heritage came to *me*. A jeweller would have been sure to cheat her, poor child!"

And she went down to the drawing-room feeling serenely satisfied with herself.

CHAPTER II

RUSHING TO CONCLUSIONS

Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, as she sat in the drawing-room, where the curtains had been drawn and the lamps lighted, was occupied with a project which she was anxious to impart to her husband as soon as he returned. Some time before a dull rumble from the valley had informed her that his usual train was approaching Gablehurst station, and now she heard the click of the front gate, the crunch of his well-known step on the gravel, and the opening of the hall door.

"I want to speak to you for a moment, Sidney," she said, opening the drawing-room door. "Come in here before you go up to dress." (Mrs. Stimpson insisted on his dressing for dinner. It was customary in all really good society, and also it would prevent him from feeling awkward in evening clothes – which it never did.)

"Very well, my dear," he said, entering. "Any news with you?" which was his invariable question.

Mr. Stimpson was short and inclined to be stout. What remained of his hair was auburn and separated in the middle by a wide parting; he had close-cut whiskers of a lighter red, which met in his moustache, and if his eyes had been narrow, instead of round and filmy like a seal's, and his mouth had been firm, and not loose and slightly open, he would not have been at all a bad caricature of his Majesty King Henry the Eighth.

"Nothing – except, but I'll tell you about that afterwards. Sit down, do, and don't fidget... Well, I've been thinking, Sidney, that we really ought to ask the Chevril Thistletons to a quiet little dinner. Not to meet any of our *usual* set, of course! We could have the dear Rector, who, if he *is* Low Church, is very well connected – and Lady Harriet Elmslie."

Mr. Stimpson showed no enthusiasm at the suggestion. "Lady Elmslie, Selina!" he cried. "But we don't *know* her ladyship!"

"I do wish you would learn to use titles correctly, Sidney! Lady *Harriet* Elmslie – not Lady *Elmslie*! And you shouldn't speak of her, except to servants, as 'her ladyship'; that's only done by inferiors."

"Well, my love, whatever may be the correct way of speaking of her, the fact remains that we haven't the honour of her acquaintance."

"That's just where you're mistaken! We *have*, or at least *I* have;" and she described how she had come to enjoy that privilege.

"Well," he admitted at the conclusion, "she certainly seems to have made herself exceedingly affable, but it doesn't follow that she'd come and dine, even if we asked her."

"She would if it was to meet the Thistletons."

"Perhaps so, my love, but – er – we don't know that *they* would come."

"Of course they would, if they knew we were expecting Lady Harriet. For goodness' sake, Sidney, don't swing your foot like that – you know I can't bear it. All *you* have to do is to find out from Mr. Thistleton what evenings the week after next would be most convenient, and *I'll* undertake the rest!"

"I – I really couldn't do that, Selina. I'm a proud man, in my way, and I don't care about exposing myself unnecessarily to a rebuff."

"Why should you be rebuffed? After all, he's only a junior partner!"

"True, my love, but that doesn't make him less stand-offish. He may be *in* the business, but he's not *of* it. I doubt myself whether even old Cramphorn would venture to invite him to dinner, and if he did, I'd bet a tidy sum that the Honourable Mr. Chevril Thistleton – "

"Mr. —*not* the Honourable *Mr.* Thistleton, Sidney," corrected his wife, who had studied all such *minutiae* in a handbook written by a lady of unimpeachable authority. "The term is *never* employed in ordinary conversation, or on visiting cards. But, if you won't show a proper spirit, I shall write myself to Mrs. Thistleton and propose one or two dates."

"It would be no good, my love," said Mr. Stimpson, brought to bay, "because, if you *must* know, I — er — *did* approach the subject with Thistleton — and — well, his manner was not sufficiently encouraging to induce me to try it again. Not so fond of being made to feel as if I was no better than one of our own clerks. I get quite enough of *that* from old Cramphorn!"

"You should *assert* yourself more, Sidney, if you want people to respect you."

"I'm always asserting myself — but old Cramphorn never listens! Just goes on his own way. Won't hear of any changes — what was good enough when the firm started a hundred years ago is good enough for *him* — now I'm all for *new* ideas myself — Progress and so forth!"

"That's what has kept us back," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson; "we should have been in a far better set here than we're ever likely to be now if you hadn't given yourself out as a violent Radical, when it's well known that all best Gablehurst people are Conservatives, and several who are not really entitled to be anything of the kind. As it is, I suppose I must be content to pass my life in this suburban hole and mix with none but second-rate people. But I certainly cannot expect Lady Harriet to come here and meet them, so there's an end of it. If she imagines I've no desire to pursue her acquaintance, it can't be helped, that's all! And now you had better go up and dress."

The whole family were assembled by the time Mr. Stimpson re-appeared — his wife was in her armchair by the standard lamp. Edna was at the writing-table revising her notes of the afternoon's lecture, and Clarence was seated close by, while Ruby was whispering earnestly to Daphne on one of the chintz couches.

"All of you down before me, eh?" said the head of the family after the usual salutations had been exchanged. "But I went up long after everybody else. And not late after all — I've taught myself to dress in well under ten minutes, you see!"

"Wish he'd taught himself not to wear a white tie with a dinner jacket!" grumbled Clarence to Edna in an undertone.

"Couldn't you *tell* him about it?" she replied.

"I could — but what'd be the good? He'd only turn up next time in a tail-coat and a black bow!" said Clarence gloomily. "The poor old governor's one of the people who never learn —!"

Clarence's own type was that for which the latest term is "knut." He was accepted both by his family, his intimates, and himself as an infallible guide on things in general. When consulted as to matters on which he happened to be entirely ignorant, and these were not a few — he had formed the habit of preserving a pregnant silence, as of one who could say a good deal on the subject if he were at liberty to speak. And this in itself denoted a certain degree of intelligence.

In appearance he was well built, though only of average height. He had small green eyes like his mother's; his light sandy hair had a natural ripple, and his pale face expressed nothing beyond an assured consciousness of his own superiority. And yet he was not without a certain sense of humour in matters which did not immediately concern himself, though, owing to particular circumstances, it was just then distinctly in abeyance.

"What time do you get back from the City to-morrow afternoon, my boy?" his father asked.

"Not going up at all, Pater," said Clarence. "Told them I shouldn't." He was thinking that after dinner would be quite time enough to break the news that, on receiving a severe wiggling for general slackness, he had lost his temper, and offered to resign his post — an offer that had been accepted with disconcerting alacrity.

"Ah, Sidney," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "*Clarence* knows how to assert himself, you see!"

"I merely asked," Mr. Stimpson explained, "because I'm taking a Saturday off myself, and I thought we could have a round or two of golf together, eh, my boy?"

"I don't mind going round with you before lunch," said Clarence. "Engaged for the afternoon; but, if you'll take *my* advice, Governor, you'd better practise a bit longer with the Pro before you attempt to *play*. No good trying to run till you can walk, don't you know, what?" (He had learnt to terminate his sentences with "what" as a kind of smart shibboleth.) "Hullo, Mater!" he broke off suddenly, as he noticed the pendant on her ample bosom, "where did you get that thing? Out of a cracker?"

"Certainly not, Clarence; I am not in the habit of wearing cheap jewellery. And this cost a considerable sum, though I daresay it is worth what I paid for it."

"Did you go much of a mucker for it, Mater?"

"If I did, Clarence, I was well able to do so, thanks to dear old Uncle Wibberley's legacy."

"I must say, Mother," said Edna, "it's far the most artistic thing I've ever known you buy."

"It isn't *everybody's* taste," remarked Mr. Stimpson, "but I should say myself that it wasn't a bad investment. Where did you come across it, my love?"

"My dear Sidney," replied Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson with much majesty, "as I purchased it with my own money, where I came across it, and what I paid for it are surely matters that only concern myself."

Daphne, who could hardly avoid hearing this conversation, was impressed by the tact and delicacy it displayed. It never occurred to her that Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson's reticence might be inspired by other motives than a generous desire to spare her feelings. "She really is quite a decent sort!" she told herself.

Clarence had not been unobservant of her – indeed it would not be too much to say that he had been acutely conscious all the time of Miss Heritage's presence.

Ever since she had become a member of the household he had alternated between the desire to impress her and the dread of becoming entangled in the toils of an artful little enchantress. It was true that since her arrival in the family she had made no effort whatever to enchant him; indeed, she had treated him with easy indifference – but this, his experience of her sex and the world told him, was probably assumed. She could hardly help knowing that he was something of a "catch" from her point of view, and scheming to ensnare him.

Perhaps Clarence, with his now dubious prospects, felt himself rather less of a catch than usual; perhaps it occurred to him that being moderately ensnared would be pleasantly exciting, since he would always know when to stop. At all events, he lounged gracefully toward the sofa, on which she and Ruby were sitting: "I say, Miss Heritage," he began, "you mustn't let my Kiddie sister bore you like this. She's been whispering away in your ear for the last ten minutes."

Daphne denied that she was being bored.

"Of *course* she isn't!" said Ruby; "I was finishing the story I began telling her when we were walking home. We'd got to where Daphne first meets the Fairy Prince."

"Then it's all about Miss Heritage, is it?"

"I call the heroine 'Daphne' in my story, after her – but, of course, she isn't Miss Heritage *really*."

"You don't seem to think it very likely that Miss Heritage will ever come across a Fairy Prince, eh!" commented Clarence, and wondered the next moment whether he mightn't have said something to commit himself.

"I hope not," said Ruby, slipping her hand affectionately through Daphne's arm, "because then she'd leave me, and I should never see her again!"

"I shouldn't worry about it just yet, darling," said Daphne, smiling. "Fairy Princes are only to be found in their own country – and it's a long way from here to Fairyland."

Clarence was noticing, not for the first time, that her full face was shaped like a shield, also that two fascinating little creases came in it when she smiled, and her pretty grey eyes had a soft sparkle in them. "I must be jolly careful," he told himself.

"I should prefer, Miss Heritage," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, who had overheard the last sentence, "that Ruby was not encouraged to fill her head with Fairy tales. I don't think them good for her."

"Oh, come, Mater!" protested Clarence, unable to resist the *rôle* of Champion. "Where on earth is the harm of them."

"Surely, Clarence," Edna put in instructively, "there is *this* harm – they give such an utterly false impression of what life really *is*! That's why I've never been able to take any interest in them."

"More likely," said Clarence, "because you've got no imagination."

"If I hadn't," retorted Edna, "I should hardly have got through the Poetry I have. Most of Browning and Alfred Austin, and all Ella Wheeler Wilcox! It's only the lowest degree of imagination that invents things that couldn't possibly have happened!"

"They may have left off, Edna, but they happened *once*," declared Ruby. "I know there *used* to be Fairyland somewhere, with Kings and Queens and Fairy Godmothers and enchanted castles and magicians and Ogres and Dragons and things in it. And Miss Heritage believes it, too —*don't* you, Miss Heritage, dear?"

"I'm much mistaken in Miss Heritage, my dear," said Mr. Stimpson gallantly, "if her head isn't too well screwed on (if she'll allow me to say so) to believe in any such stuff. All very well for the Nursery, you know, but not to be taken seriously, or ... why, what's that? Most extraordinary noise! Seems to come from outside, overhead."

They could all hear a strange kind of flapping whirr in the air, it grew nearer and louder and then suddenly ceased.

"Aeroplane," pronounced Clarence, drawing the window curtains and looking out. "Miles away by now, though. Terrific pace they travel at. Too dark to see anything."

He returned to the hearthrug, and the moment afterwards, the silence outside was broken by a shrill, clear call which seemed to come from silver trumpets.

"Very odd," said Mr. Stimpson, "some one seems to be playing trumpets on the gravel-sweep!"

"If it's one of those travelling German bands," said his wife, "you'd better send them away at once, Sidney."

But, whoever they were, they had already entered the hall, for almost immediately the drawing-room door was thrown open and two persons wearing tabards and gaily plumed hats entered and sounded another blast.

"Pon my word, you know," gasped Mr. Stimpson, "this is really –"

The heralds stepped back as a third person entered. He was wearing a rich suit of some long-departed period, and, with his furrowed face and deep-set eyes, he rather resembled an elderly mastiff, though he did not convey the same impression of profound wisdom. He gazed round the room as though he himself were as bewildered as its other occupants, who were speechless with amazement. Then his eye fell on Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, and he hesitated no longer, but, advancing towards her chair, sank with some difficulty on one knee, seized her hand, and kissed it with every sign of deep respect.

"Heaven be praised!" he cried in a voice that faltered with emotion, "I have at last found the Queen we have so long sought in vain!" He spoke with some sort of foreign accent, but they all understood him perfectly. As he knelt they heard a loud crack which seemed to come from between his shoulders.

"Braces given way," whispered Clarence to Edna; "silly old ass to go kneeling in 'em!"

"Really, sir," said Mr. Stimpson, "this is most extraordinary behaviour."

"You don't understand, Sidney," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, who had recovered from her first alarm and was now in a gratified flutter; "remember what I told you about Lady Harriet and the Pageant! Pray, get up, sir," she added to the stranger, "I haven't the advantage of knowing your name."

"I am the Court Chamberlain," he said, "and my name is Treuherz von Eisenbänden."

It was unknown to Mrs. Stimpson, but she concluded that he was some Anglo-German commercial magnate, who would naturally be invited to join the Committee for any such patriotic purpose as a Pageant.

As to the excessive ceremony of his manner, that was either the proper form for the occasion, or, what was more likely, Mr. Troitz, or whatever his name was, having come fresh from a dress rehearsal, could not divest himself as yet of his assumed character. The important point was that her interview with Lady Harriet had borne fruit already, and in the shape of a pressing invitation to play the distinguished part of "Queen!" The advantages thus offered for obtaining a social footing amongst county people made it easy to overlook any trifling eccentricities where the intention was so obviously serious. "Well, Mr. Troitz," she said graciously, "since the Committee have been kind enough to ask me, I shall be very pleased to be your Queen."

"And if I may say so, Sir," said her husband, "there are few ladies in the vicinity who would prove more competent. In fact –"

"That will do, Sidney," said his wife; "if Lady Harriet and the Committee did not consider me competent to be the Queen they would not have asked me." And Mr. Stimpson said no more.

"Pardon," Mr. Treuherz said, looking at him with solemn surprise, "but – who is *this*?"

"This is my husband, Mr. Troitz – let me introduce him."

"Your husband. Then, he will be the King!"

"The King?" cried Mr. Stimpson, "why, really, I'm not sure that would be altogether in my line."

"Nonsense, Sidney. Of *course* you will be the King if they want you! And this is my son, Clarence, Mr. Troitz. My daughters, Edna and Ruby."

"A Crown Prince!" cried Treuherz, and bent low to each in turn. "And two – no, I mistake —*three* Princesses! Ah, it is too much for me altogether!"

It was almost too much for Ruby, who giggled helplessly, while even Daphne had to bite her lip rather hard for a moment.

"The other young lady," corrected Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "is merely my daughter Ruby's governess – Miss Heritage. But if you like to find a place for her as one of my ladies of honour or something, I have no objection to her accepting a part," she added, reflecting that Miss Heritage's manners and appearance would add to the family importance, while it would be a comfort to have an attendant who could not give herself such airs as might a girl belonging to a county family.

"Naturally," said Treuherz, inclining himself again. "Any member of your Majesty's household you desire to bring."

"Very well; I suppose, Miss Heritage, you have no objection? Then you will accompany us, please. And now, Mr. Troitz, about when shall we be wanted?"

"When?" he replied. "But now! At once. Already I have the car waiting!"

"Now?" exclaimed Clarence; "rum time to rehearse – what?"

"Who said anything about rehearsing, Clarence?" said his mother impatiently. "It's necessary for them to see us and talk over the arrangements. It's not likely to take long."

"But it'll do later, my love," put in Mr. Stimpson, who did not like the idea of turning out without his dinner. "Fact is, Mr. Troitz, we were just about to sit down to dinner. Why not keep the car waiting a bit and join us? No ceremony, you know – just as you *are*!"

"Sire, I regret that it is impossible," he said. "I have undertaken to convey you with all possible speed. If we delay I cannot answer for what may happen."

"You hear what Mr. Troitz says, Sidney," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, alarmed at the idea of another being chosen in her absence. "What *does* it matter if we do dine a little late? Children, we must go and put on our things at once – your warmest cloaks, mind – we're sure to find it cold motoring. Sidney and Clarence, you had better get your coats on – we shall be down directly."

Mr. Treuherz and the heralds stood at attention in the hall. While Clarence and his father struggled into their great-coats, neither of them in a very good temper, Mr. Stimpson being annoyed at postponing his dinner for what he called "tomfoolery," and Clarence secretly sulky because his parent could not be induced to see the propriety of going up to change his tie.

"I haven't *yet* made out, Mother," said Edna, as they came downstairs, "exactly where we're going to – or what we're expected to do when we get there."

"It will either be The Hermitage – Lady Harriet's, you know – or Mr. Troitz's country house, wherever *that* is. And, of course, the Committee require to know what times will suit us for rehearsing."

"I wish you'd settle it all without *me*," complained Edna. "I'd much rather stay at home, and run over my lecture notes... Well, if I must come, I shall bring my note-book with me in case I'm bored." And she ran into the drawing-room, and came back with the note-book, rather as an emblem of her own intellectual superiority than with any intention of referring to it. However, as will be found later, the manuscript proved to be of some service in the future.

Daphne and Ruby were the last to join the party in the hall, Ruby wildly excited at the unexpected jaunt and the prospects of not going to bed till ever so late, and Daphne, though a little doubtful whether Mrs. Stimpson was quite justified in bringing her, inclined to welcome almost any change from the evening *routine* of "Inglegarth." And then, after Mrs. Stimpson had given some hurried instructions to the hopelessly mystified Mitchell, the whole family issued out of the Queen Anne porch, and were conducted by Treuherz, who, to their intense confusion, insisted on walking backwards to the car, while the heralds performed another flourish on their silver trumpets. It was pitch-dark when they had got to the asphalt pavement outside their gates, but they could just make out the contours of the car in the light that streamed across the hedge to the stained glass front-door.

"Jolly queer-looking car," said Clarence. It was certainly unusually large, and seemed to have somewhat fantastic lines and decorations.

"Oh, never mind about the car!" cried Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, who was inside it already, a vague, bundled-up shape in the gloom. "It's part of the Pageant, of course! Get in, Clarence, get in! We're late as it is! and if there's a thing I detest, it's keeping people waiting!"

"All right, Mater!" said Clarence, clambering in. "I can't make out what the dickens they've done with the bonnet – but we seem to be moving, what?"

Slowly the car had begun to glide along the road. Mr. Treuherz was seated in front, probably at the steering-wheel, though none was visible. The heralds sat in the rear, and the car was of such a size that there was abundant room for the family in the centre. Some yards ahead they heard a curious dry rustle and clatter, and could distinguish a confused grey mass of forms that seemed to be clearing the way for them, though whether they were human beings it was not possible to tell till they passed a lighted street-lamp.

"Why, goodness gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "they look like – like *ostriches*!"

She was mistaken here, because they were merely storks, but, before she could identify them more correctly, they all suddenly rose in the air with a whirr like that of a hundred spinning looms – and the car rose with them.

"Stop!" screamed Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "Sidney, tell Mr. Troitz to stop! I *insist* on knowing where we are being taken to!"

Treuherz glanced over his shoulder. "Where should I conduct your Majesties," he said, "but to your own Kingdom of Märchenland?"

Mrs. Stimpson and her husband would no doubt have protested, demanded explanations, insisted upon being put down at once, had they been able; but, whether it was that the car had some peculiarly soporific tendency, or whether it was merely the sudden swift rush through the upper air, a torpor had already fallen on the whole Stimpson family. It was even questionable if they remained long enough awake to hear their destination.

Daphne, for some reason, did not fall asleep till later. She lay back in her luxuriously cushioned seat, watching the birds as they flew, spread out in a wide fan against the dusky blue evening sky. Gablehurst, with its scattered lights, artistic villa-residences, and prosaic railway station – its valley and common and wooded hills, were far below and soon left behind at an ever increasing distance. But she did not feel in the least afraid. It was odd, but, after the first surprise, she had lost all sense of strangeness in a situation so foreign to all her previous experience.

"So we're being taken to Märchenland," she was thinking. "That's the same as Fairyland, practically. At least it's where all the things they call Fairy stories really happened, and —*why* I can't imagine – but Mr. and Mrs. Stimpson have been chosen King and Queen! And the poor dear things have no idea of it yet! Oh, I wonder" (and here, no doubt, the little creases came into her cheeks again, for she laughed softly to herself), "*I wonder* what they'll say or do when they find out!" And while Daphne was still wondering, her eyelids closed gently, and she, too, was sleeping soundly.

CHAPTER III

FINE FEATHERS

Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson was the first of her party to recover consciousness. When she did, she was greatly surprised to find that it was broad daylight, and that she was lying on a grassy slope, behind which was a forest of huge pines. Close beside her were the recumbent forms of her husband and family, which led her to the natural conclusion that the car must have met with an accident.

"Sidney!" she cried, shaking him by the shoulder. "Speak to me! You're – you're not *seriously* hurt, are you?"

"Eh, what?" he replied sleepily, and evidently imagining that he was comfortably in bed at home; "all right, my dear, all right! I'll get up and bring in the tea-tray presently. Lots of time... Why, hullo!" he exclaimed, after being shaken once more, as he sat up and rubbed his eyes. "How do we all come to be *here*?"

The others were awake by this time. "And now we're here," put in Clarence, "where *are* we, eh, Mater?"

"It is no use asking *me*, Clarence. I know no more than you do. The last thing I remember was our all getting into the car to go and see the Pageant Committee. I've a vague recollection of ostriches – but no, I must have been dreaming *them*. However, the car seems to have upset somehow, only I don't see it about anywhere."

"No," said Mr. Stimpson, "or old Thingumagig, or those fellows with the trumpets either."

"Dumped us down here, and gone off with the car," said Clarence. "Looks as if we'd been the victims of a practical joke, what?"

"They would never dare to do that!" said his Mother. "I expect they have missed their way in the dark. Very careless of them. I don't know what Lady Harriet and the Committee will think of me. They'll probably ask somebody else to take the part of Queen before we can get there – for I'm sure we must be a good hundred miles away from Gablehurst!"

"The Baron said that he was taking us to Märchenland, Mrs. Stimpson," said Daphne; "and I'm *almost* sure that that is where we really are."

"And where may Märchenland be?" inquired Mrs. Stimpson sharply. "I never heard of it myself."

"Well," said Daphne, "it's another name for – for Fairyland, you know."

"Fairyland indeed!" replied Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson with some irritation. "You will find it difficult to persuade me to believe that I am in *Fairyland*, Miss Heritage! To begin with, there is no such place, and if there was, perhaps you will kindly tell me how we could possibly have got to it?"

"Through the air," explained Daphne patiently. "That car was drawn by *storks*, you see – not ostriches."

"When you have *quite* woke up, Miss Heritage," said Mrs. Stimpson, "you will realise what nonsense you are talking."

"Whatever this place is," said Clarence, "it don't look English, somehow, to *me*. I mean to say – that town over there – what?" He pointed across the wide plain to a cluster of towers, spires, gables, and pinnacles which glittered and gleamed faintly through the shimmering morning haze.

"It certainly has rather a Continental appearance," observed his father.

"If it has," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "it is only some buildings or scenery or something they have run up for the Pageant. So we haven't been taken in the wrong direction after all."

"I believe, Mummy," chirped Ruby, "Miss Heritage is right, and this *is* Fairyland."

"Don't be so ridiculous, child! You'll believe next that we came here in a car drawn by flying storks, I suppose!"

"D'you know, Mater," said Clarence, "I'm not so sure we mayn't have. What I mean is – there's some sort of flying machine coming along now. I grant you it isn't drawn by storks, but they're *birds* anyhow, and there seems to be some one in the car too."

"Nothing of the kind!" declared Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson obstinately. "At least one may fancy one sees anything with the sun in our eyes as it is. Well, upon my word!" she added, still incredulously, as an iridescent shell-shaped chariot attached to a team of snow-white doves *volplaned* down from a dizzy height to a spot only a few yards away, "I really could not have – who, and what can this old person be?"

The occupant of the chariot had already got out of it, and was slowly coming towards them, supporting herself on a black crutch-handled staff. As she drew nearer they could see that she was a woman of great age. She wore a large ruff, a laced stomacher, wide quilted petticoats, and a pointed hat with a broad brim. Her expression was severe, but not unkindly, while she evidently considered herself a personage of some importance.

"She looks exactly like the Fairy Godmother in the pictures," whispered Ruby.

"Whoever she may be," said her Mother, scrambling to her feet with more haste than dignity, "I suppose I shall have to go and speak to her, as I presume I am the person she has come to meet."

However, it was Daphne who was addressed by the new-comer.

"The Court Chamberlain, Baron Treuherz von Eisenbänden, has brought me the glad tidings of your arrival, my child," she said in a high cracked voice, "and, as the high official Court Godmother to the Royal Family, I felt that I should be the first to bid you welcome."

This was more than Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson could be expected to stand without a protest.

"Pardon me," she said, throwing back her cloak as though she were in need of air, "pardon me, Madam, but I think you are mistaking my daughter's governess for *me*. I am Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson!"

The old lady turned sharply, and as her eyes fell on the matron's indignant face and heaving bosom, she instantly became deferential and almost apologetic. "You must forgive me, my dear," she said, "for not recognising you before. But at my age – I may tell you I am nearing the end of my second century – one is apt to forget the flight of Time. Or it may be that Time in your world flies more quickly than in ours. I did not stay to hear more from the Baron than that he had succeeded in finding our Queen, and, to be quite plain with you, I was unprepared to find you so mature."

Then, thought Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson confusedly, she *had* been brought here for the Pageant after all. But what very odd people seemed to be getting it up!

"Baron – whatever his name is, appeared to be quite satisfied that I was suited to the part," she said coldly. "Of course, if you require someone younger –"

"There can be no manner of doubt, my dear, that you are the Queen we have been seeking, so the mere fact that you are rather older than some of us expected is of no importance whatever."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "I do not consider myself more than middle-aged, and have generally been taken for younger than I am, Mrs. – , I haven't the pleasure of knowing your name."

"Here they call me the Fairy Vogelflug; in the neighbouring Kingdom of Clairdelune my name is Voldoiseau. I have officiated as Court Godmother to the reigning Royal families in both countries for many generations."

"I *thought* you were a Fairy Godmother!" cried Ruby; "and I'm sure you're a *good* Fairy, and can do all sorts of wonderful things."

"I used to, my child, in my younger days, but my powers are not what they were, and I seldom exercise them now, because it exhausts me too severely to do so. Once there were several of us Court Godmothers, but I am the only one left, and my health is so poor that I can do little for my God-children but give them moral teaching and wise counsel. However, such good offices as I can still render shall be entirely at your service."

"You are very kind," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, resenting the other's air of patronage, "but all my children are already provided with God-parents. As you tell me you are a Fairy," she continued, "I suppose I must accept your word for it – but it will take a great deal more than that to make me believe that we are in Fairyland."

"I thought," said the Fairy, "you already knew that the name of this country is Märchenland."

It should be said here once for all that the Wibberley-Stimpsons found no difficulty in understanding, or making themselves perfectly intelligible to any Märchenlanders, although they always had a curious feeling that they were conversing in a foreign language.

"Whatever the country is called," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson aggressively, "I should like some explanation of that Baron Troitz's conduct in entrapping us into coming here. I was distinctly given to understand that I had been chosen to be the Queen at our local Pageant, and that we were being taken to talk over the arrangements with the Committee. Now he has gone off in the most ungentlemanly way, and left us stranded and helpless here!"

"You must have misunderstood the good Baron," said the Fairy Vogelflug; "and he is far too loyal to desert you. He has merely hastened on to Eswareinmal, the city whose walls and towers you see yonder, to prepare for your reception. As you probably know, he has devoted himself with the most untiring zeal to his mission of seeking you out and restoring you to your inheritance."

"He never said a word about that to me – not a word. If I am really entitled to any property in this country, I should be glad to know where it is situated, and what is its exact value."

"Then," said the Fairy, "I may inform you that you are entitled, as the daughter of your late Father – our long-lost and much-lamented Prince Chrysopras – to no less a possession than the Crown of Märchenland."

"You – you don't *say* so!" gasped Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "The Crown of – Sidney, did you hear *that*."

"It's some mistake, my dear," he said. "Must be! ... My wife's father, Ma'am, though in some respects – a – a remarkable character, was never a Prince – at least that *I've* heard of."

"It doesn't at all follow, Sidney," said his wife in a nettled tone, "that anything you don't happen to have heard of is not a fact. There always *was* a mystery about poor dear Papa's origin. He was most reticent about it – even with me. And I know it was rumoured that Prinsley was not his real name. So it would not surprise me in the least if Mrs. Fogleplug turned out to be right, though I cannot say till she gives us further particulars."

"I will do so most willingly," said the Fairy. "But as it will take me some time to relate them, I should strongly advise you all to sit down."

They seated themselves round her in a semicircle, and presently she began:

"You must know," she said, "that our mighty and gracious Sovereign, the late King Smaragd, was twice wedded. By his first wife he had an only son, Prince Chrysopras, a gallant and goodly prince, beloved not only by his father, but by the whole nation. Well, after mourning his first wife for a longer period than is customary, King Smaragd took to himself another, who was much younger than himself, besides being marvellously beautiful."

"And of course she hated the poor Prince," said Ruby. "Stepmothers always do in the stories."

"I have not said she hated him," said the Court Godmother, who did not like her points to be anticipated. "On the contrary, she treated him with every mark of affection, and was constantly bestowing on him gifts of the costliest description. One day she presented him with a wondrous mechanical horse, fiercer and more mettlesome than even the steeds that are born in Märchenland."

"Motor-bike, what," suggested Clarence sapiently.

"A mechanical horse is what I *said*," repeated the Fairy, "resembling others in shape and beauty, but made of metal. Prince Chrysopras, being a skilful and fearless horseman – "

"Indeed he was!" put in Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "He used to ride regularly in the Row, almost to the last. On 'Joggles,' such a dear brown fat cob. He was one of what I believe was known

as 'The Liver Brigade' ... a fact which for some reason I can't pretend to fathom seems to be causing you amusement, Miss Heritage."

Daphne, whose sense of humour was occasionally an inconvenience to her, had certainly found the notion of a Fairy Prince in the Liver Brigade a little too much for her gravity. However, she attributed her lapse to the name of the horse.

"It was the name they gave it at the Livery Stables," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "And I really cannot see myself – but we are interrupting this good lady here."

"You are," said the Fairy. "I was about to say that Prince Chrysopras was greatly delighted by his Royal Stepmother's gift, and at once leapt on the back of the strange steed."

"What I call asking for trouble," commented Clarence.

"I know what happened!" Ruby struck in eagerly. "It flew right up into the air with him, and poor Grandpapa fell off."

"If he had, none of you would be here at the moment," said the Fairy. "Don't be in such a hurry, my child. He was much too good a rider to fall off. But the horse flew up and up with him till both could no longer be seen. The remains of the steed were found long afterwards on a mountain top. But nothing more was ever seen of the Prince, who was supposed to have perished in one of our lakes."

"Then he must have fallen off after all," insisted Ruby.

"No, no, Ruby," said her mother, with a sense that, where the credit of her family was concerned, nothing was too improbable for belief; "the horse flew with him to England, or *somewhere* in Europe – or else he couldn't have met your dear grandmother, whom none of you ever saw, for she died long before you were born. And I expect that, after he got off, the horse flew back again, and was just able to get to Märchenland before the machinery broke down. And dear Papa very naturally would not care for people to know that he had got there by such peculiar means, which accounts for my never having heard of it before."

"Exactly," said the Fairy Vogelflug; "but King Smaragd only knew that his son was lost to him, and when he discovered that the horse was enchanted, and that his Queen had bribed the Hereditary Grand Magician to construct it, his anger knew no bounds."

"Enough to annoy anybody," said Mr. Wibberley-Stimpson. "I should certainly –"

"He ordered," the Fairy went on, without appearing to feel any interest in what Mr. Stimpson would have done in similar circumstances, "both the Queen and the Grand Magician to be enclosed in a barrel, the inside of which had been set with sharp nails, and rolled down into the lake from the top of the mountain."

"I should say myself," remarked Mr. Stimpson, "that that was going a little too far. But he certainly had great provocation."

"He also commanded that all wizards and enchanters should renounce their practices for ever, and adopt some other calling, or be banished from the Country."

"There," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson approvingly, "I think he was *so* right. I would never encourage any of those clairvoyant people myself. And did he marry a third wife at all?"

"Not if he was wise!" said Clarence.

"No, although it grieved him sorely that he had no heir to succeed him. But towards the end of his days, he dreamed repeatedly that his son was yet living. He beheld him in these visions a wanderer in some far-off land, earning his bread as a musician, for in Music he had rare skill."

"I fancy he must have given it up when he took to Finance," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "though he kept his taste for it. I well remember his buying a beautiful orchestrion which used to be in the Picture Gallery."

"Well," pursued the Fairy, "in further dreams it was revealed to the King that his son was married to one, who, though not of his own race or rank, was both gently born and very fair to see."

"Pollentine was the maiden name of your Grandmother on *my* side, my dears," explained Mrs. Stimpson to her family. "She must have been good-looking as a girl, judging by a daguerrotype I had of her. Her father was a highly distinguished Auctioneer and Estate Agent in East Croydon, as I daresay was also revealed in the King's dream."

"Of that I can say nothing," replied the Court Godmother; "but I know that further visions showed him his son as a widower with an only daughter, and later still that he was no longer living. And so much was the King impressed that he caused a search to be made for this grand-daughter of his in every country that is known to us. Even when he lay on his death-bed he did not give up hope that she would be found, and so he left his Kingdom in charge of his trusted favourite Marshal Federhelm as Regent, with strict injunctions to continue seeking for the missing Queen."

"And how," inquired Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "did the Marshal manage to find me out?"

"It was not he. He soon convinced himself that all further endeavours were useless. No, it is to the devotion of our worthy Court Chamberlain, the Baron Treuherz von Eisenbänden, that your discovery is owing. He had grieved so deeply to see Märchenland without a Sovereign that, after the example of 'Faithful John,' the founder of his family, he had placed iron hoops round his chest to keep his heart from breaking."

"We heard 'em go," said Clarence; "thought it was only his braces."

"At length," continued the Fairy, "the Baron went in secret to Xuriel, the Astrologer Royal, and induced him to consult the stars. Which Xuriel did, and by much study and intricate calculation he succeeded in ascertaining the exact spot in the other world where the Queen would be discovered, and even the means by which she might be recognised."

"Ah," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "I shall begin to believe in Astronomy after this. But even now I don't *quite* understand how Baron Troitz got to 'Inglegarth.'"

"That was by *my* assistance. I placed my travelling car at his service, with the wise storks that fly straight to any place to which they are directed, even though they may never have heard of it before. Happily for Märchenland, Xuriel's calculations have proved correct, except that he did not foresee that the Baron would bring back two Sovereigns instead of one."

"What – is the Gov'nor going to be King?" inquired Clarence. "My hat!"

"That would be ridiculous, Clarence," said his mother, "when your Father hasn't a drop of Royal blood in his veins! He can't even rank as Prince Consort!"

"Not so, my dear, not so," corrected the Fairy, "by the custom of Märchenland, anyone who weds the Sovereign shares the throne, and your husband will be as truly the King of this Country as you will be its Queen."

"Oh, is *that* the rule?" said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, not best pleased. "Well, Sidney, I trust you will show yourself equal to your position, that is all."

"I trust so, my love," he replied uneasily. "It – it's come on me at rather short notice. However!"

"If Daddy and Mums are King and Queen," asked Ruby, "will Edna and me be Princesses?"

"Undoubtedly you will," said the Court Godmother.

"Then Clarence will be a Prince. So you see, Miss Heritage, dear, you *have* met a Prince after all!"

"Shut up, Kiddie!" said the new Crown Prince in some confusion.

"And what will Miss Heritage be, Mummy?"

"Miss Heritage will be what she was before, my dear – your governess."

"But I shan't want one any more – we're in Fairyland now – and Fairy Princesses haven't got to do lessons. Oh, Mums, couldn't you make Miss Heritage a Princess too? Do!"

"Why not?" said the Fairy, glancing at Daphne, whose colour had risen slightly. "Anybody might very well take her to be one as it is."

"Miss Heritage," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "has, I am sure, too much good sense to expect a title of any kind. She will continue to be my daughter's instructress, and I may possibly find a place for her as Mistress of the Robes or something; but it's much too early to say anything definite at – Really, Edna," she broke off suddenly, "how you can sit there calmly reading as if nothing had happened!"

"I was merely running through my lecture-notes again, Mother," said Edna. "If I *am* a Princess," she added, for the benefit of the Court Godmother, "that is no reason why I shouldn't go on cultivating my mind."

"Now you're a Princess, my dear," replied her mother, "it doesn't signify to anybody whether your mind is cultivated or not."

"It signifies a great deal to *me*, mother," said Edna, and resumed the study of her notes with an air of conscious merit.

"I must say *one* thing, Mrs. Fogleplug," Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson proceeded; "it would have been more considerate if I had been given proper notice, and a reasonable time to prepare for such a complete change as this. I do feel *that*."

She did; it was a great deprivation to her to have lost the opportunity of mentioning casually to her Gablehurst friends – and Lady Harriet especially – that she would shortly be leaving them to occupy a throne.

"Precisely my own feeling," said Mr. Stimpson, thinking regretfully how the news would have made that confounded fellow Thistleton sit up, and of the sensation it might have produced in the train to the City. "It is, to say the least of it, unfortunate that I had no time to communicate with the other members of my firm."

"And there's Clarence, too!" said his fond mother. "His Company will be quite helpless without him!"

"They may be in a bit of a hole at first," he admitted, thankful now that he had said nothing about his resignation, or the readiness with which it had been accepted. "Still, no fellow is indispensable. What?"

The Fairy explained that haste had been unavoidable, as it might have been injurious to the storks if they had remained longer in a climate to which they were unaccustomed.

"But why send storks to fetch us at all?" demanded Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "Why not some more modern conveyance?.. There they are again with the car – coming back for us, I expect... Yes, I can make out Baron Troitz and the trumpeters – and there seems to be a gentleman in armour with them."

"The Regent, Marshal Federhelm," said the Fairy. "He is coming to offer his congratulations."

"Is he?" cried Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, scrambling to her feet again in some dismay. "A Regent! I – I wish I knew the proper way of addressing him!"

The storks by this time had brought the car to ground, and were now standing about on one leg with folded wings and an air of detachment. The Marshal alighted and advanced slowly towards the Stimpsons while the heralds sounded their trumpets.

He made a formidable and warrior-like figure in his golden half-armour of a kind unknown to antiquarians, and great jack-boots of gilded leather. He was tall, and the towering mass of waving feathers that crowned his helmet made him look taller still. His vizor was raised, showing a swarthy, hook-nosed face, with quick, restless eyes like a lizard's, a fierce moustache, and a bristling beard that spread out in a stiff black fan.

"*You* had better speak to him, Sidney," whispered his wife, overcome by sudden panic; "I really can't."

"Er – " began Mr. Stimpson nervously, "I believe I have the pleasure of addressing the Regent. We – we're the new King and Queen, you know, and these are the other members of the family."

The Marshal seemed a little taken aback at first, but he promptly recovered himself, and bending so low that his feathers brushed Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson's nose, he placed in her hand a small velvet-covered baton studded with gold stars.

"Oh, thank you very much, I'm sure," she said. "It's quite charming. Has it got an address or anything inside it?"

"The symbol of my authority, your Majesty," he said, with soldierly curtness. "I have long desired to surrender it to hands more worthy to govern than mine."

"Very handsome of you to say so," replied Mr. Stimpson; "but I daresay you aren't altogether sorry to get out of it, eh?"

"It is too lofty a position, Sire, for a rough, simple warrior like myself," he said. "Nothing but a sense of duty to my country would have made me accept the Regency at all."

"I am sure," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "we shall find you have carried on the Kingdom for us as satisfactorily as possible."

"The people appeared to think so, your Majesty. But I am forgetting the chief purpose I am here for. I have the honour to announce that the procession will shortly be on its way to escort your Majesties to your Coronation, which is to take place this morning in the great church of Eswareinmal."

"*Coronation!*" Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson almost screamed. "Before we have so much as had our breakfast! And in these things we are wearing now! I never heard of anything so preposterous!"

"I don't care much myself," said Mr. Stimpson, "about being crowned on an empty – without having had something to eat – if it's only an egg."

"If they're going to crown the Guv'nor in a dinner-jacket and white tie," Clarence muttered to Edna, "we shall never hear the last of it, that's all!"

"There is nothing to make a fuss about, my dear," said the Court Godmother to Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, as though she were addressing a froward child; "look behind you, and you will see that everything you may require is already provided."

They looked and saw two velvet Marquees, one striped in broad bands of apple-green and mazarine blue, the other in pale rose and cream, which a party of attendants had just finished putting up. "In those pavilions," continued the Fairy, "you will find not only food prepared for you, but robes such as are fitting for a Coronation. You will have plenty of time both to eat and change your dress before the procession can possibly arrive."

"She's not likely to have got our measurements right," grumbled Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson to her eldest daughter, as they moved towards the rose-and-cream Pavilion. "I should have much preferred to be fitted by a Court dressmaker. Such a mistake to rush things like this! I rather like that Marshal, Edna; there's something very gentlemanly and straightforward about him, though I can't see why he shouldn't wear a proper uniform instead of that absurd armour."

"Shan't be sorry to get some breakfast, my boy," Mr. Stimpson remarked, as he and Clarence were making for the other marquee; "I feel a bit peckish after being so long in the night air."

"I should like a tub first, Guv'nor."

"I'm afraid," said Mr. Stimpson, "that's expecting too much in these parts."

However, on entering, they discovered, in addition to the delicacies and gorgeous costumes laid out for them, two great crystal baths filled with steaming water which exhaled a subtle but delicious perfume.

"Doing us proud, eh, Guv'nor?" was Clarence's comment on the general luxuriousness; and his father admitted that "everything seemed to have been done regardless of expense."

While the male and female members of the Royal Party were enjoying the privacy of their respective tents, the Marshal outside was expressing his sentiments to the Court Chamberlain with much vigour and freedom.

"Well, Baron," he began, "this is a great service you have done Märchenland, and I hope you are feeling proud of yourself!"

"Oh, as for that, Marshal," modestly replied the ingenuous Baron, "I have done no more than my duty."

"The devil take you and your duty," growled the Marshal. "Why, in the name of all the fiends, couldn't you have left things as they were?"

"But, Marshal," the Baron protested, "when our learned Astrologer Royal discovered the whereabouts of our lawful Queen, you were loudest in approval of my expedition!"

"How could I oppose, after you had been gabbling and cackling about it to the whole Court, and it had even reached the ears of the people? Besides, I was given to understand that this daughter of Chrysopras's was a mere girl. If she *had* been – But what have you brought us? – a middle-aged matron with a husband and family!"

"I own it was not what I had expected," said the Baron; "but since it was so, what could I do but bring them all?"

"Do? Left them where they were, of course – come back and said that that little fool of a Xuriel had made a miscalculation, as he generally does!"

"I should have been a traitor had I thus denied my Queen. For, as you have seen, she bears on her breast the very jewel of her father the Prince, even as the stars foretold."

"Undoubtedly she is his daughter," the Marshal admitted reluctantly. It never occurred to him for a moment – nor would it occur to any of his countrymen – that the pendant was anything but absolutely conclusive proof of Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson's right to the throne. Märchenland notions of what constitutes legal evidence have always been and remain elementary.

"But it's pretty plain," he went on, "that the young fool must have made a most unworthy marriage to have begotten one so utterly lacking in all queenliness and dignity."

"She will soon acquire both," the Court Chamberlain affirmed stoutly, "as she becomes more accustomed to her position."

"She may," declared the Marshal, "when a frog grows feathers. And this consort of hers! *Is* he a fit Monarch for Märchenland? Even *you*, Baron, can hardly say that for him! I may not have been beloved as Regent, but at least I have made my authority respected. But what do such a couple as this know about ruling a country? They'll make a hopeless hash of it!"

"Without guidance, perhaps," the Baron admitted; "but they will have the inestimable advantage, Marshal, of our experience and advice."

"Ha!" said the Marshal. "So they will – so they will! I was forgetting that!"

"No doubt they will submit to our guidance," went on the Baron, "and thus we shall be able to save them from any dangerous indiscretions."

"Just so," agreed the Marshal, with the flicker of a smile.

The Court Chamberlain, at all events, spoke in all sincerity. His hereditary instinct alone would have been enough to ensure his loyalty to his new Sovereigns, whatever he might think of them in private. And they were his own "finds," which gave them an added value in his estimation, as will easily be understood by any collector of curiosities.

CHAPTER IV CROWNED HEADS

"Pon my word, my love," Mr. Stimpson exclaimed, as his wife came out of her pavilion in her Coronation Robes and chain, attended by the Court Godmother, "I should hardly have known you! You look majestic! – abso-lute-ly majestic!"

"I wish I could say the same of *you*, Sidney," she replied; "but, as I have told you more than once, legs like yours never ought to be seen except in trousers... Considering my own and my daughter's robes are ready-made, Mrs. Fogleplug, they might be worse. As for Miss Heritage's – well, I should have thought myself that something simpler would have been more appropriate."

Daphne was naturally much less sumptuously dressed than the Members of the Royal family, but still, in her quaint double-peaked head-dress, fantastically slashed bodice, and long hanging sleeves, with her bright hair, too, waving loosely over her temples, its rich masses confined at the back by a network of pearls, she was dainty and bewitching enough to attract more than her due share of attention – Clarence's she attracted at once, while he was sustained by an agreeable conviction that his be-jewelled doublet, silken hose, white plumed velvet hat, and azure mantle set off his figure to unusual advantage.

"Tophole, Miss Heritage!" he said, strolling up with graceful languor. "I'm not joking – you really *are*, you know! Wish *my* kit suited me half as well! Can't help feeling a most awful ass in it, what?"

"Really?" she said carelessly. "How unpleasant for you! But perhaps if you left off thinking about it –!"

"Oh, I don't say it's so bad as all *that*!"

"I didn't suppose it *was*, quite."

Now this was not by any means the sort of deferential tribute he had counted upon, and he was a little ruffled by her failure to respond.

"Didn't you," he replied distantly, if somewhat lamely. "You'll excuse me mentioning it, Miss Heritage, as it's only in your own interests, but I believe it's considered the proper thing when you're addressed by – by Royalty, don't you know, to throw in a 'Your Royal Highness' occasionally. Of course, Court Etiquette and that may be all tosh, but I didn't make it, and all I mean to say is – it won't do to let it slide."

"Your Royal Highness will not have to rebuke me a second time," said Daphne, sinking to the ground in a curtsey which it is to be feared was wilfully exaggerated. "I'm afraid, sir," she added, as the two little creases in her cheeks made themselves visible, "that wasn't as low as it ought to have been, but your Royal Highness must make allowances for my want of experience."

"Oh, you'll soon get into it," he said, "with practice."

"And I shall have plenty of that, your Royal Highness."

Was she trying to pull his leg? he thought, as he moved away, and decided that she was most unlikely to venture on such presumption. No, it had been necessary to remind her of the deference due to him, and she would not forget the lesson in future. Perhaps he might unbend occasionally in private, but, on second thoughts, that would be more dangerous than ever now.

Ruby had seized Daphne and was embracing her in a burst of violent affection. "Oh, Miss Heritage, darling," she cried, "you do look such a duck in that dress – doesn't she, Mummy?"

"I see no resemblance, my dear," said her mother coldly, "between Miss Heritage and any description of poultry. And, as the procession will be here in another minute, you had better take your place quietly by me... Really, Ruby," she added in an undertone, as the child obeyed, "you

must remember you're a Princess now. It isn't at all proper for you to be seen pawing your governess about in public."

"I *wasn't* pawing her about, Mums!" protested Ruby; "only hugging her. And if I mayn't do that, I don't want to be a Princess at all!"

By this time the procession had arrived. It was headed by a band of knights in resplendent but rather extravagant armour, carrying lances with streaming pennons. After them rode the Courtiers on gaily caparisoned steeds, followed by a bevy of Maids of Honour on cream-coloured palfreys. A company of soldiers came next, some of whom bore heavy matchlocks of an ancient period, and the rest pikes and halberds. However, they marched with as proud and confident a step as though their weapons were of the very latest pattern – which very likely they thought they were. Following them was a State Coach, a huge, cumbrous vehicle with unglazed windows; it seemed to be of pure gold, and was drawn by sixteen milk-white horses in blue trappings.

After the procession had halted, the Court Chamberlain formally presented the members of the Royal Household, whose mere titles sounded impressively on the ear of their new Mistress. There were Prince Tapfer von Schneiderleinheimer and Prince Hansmeinigel; Baron Müllerbürschen, Baron von Bohnenranken, and Count von Daumerlingstamm; Princess Rapunzelhauser, Princess Goldernenfingerleinigen, and Princess Flachspinnenlosburg; Baroness Belohnte von Haulemännerschen, Baroness Kluge Bauerngrossochterheimer, and Countess Gänsehirtin am Brunnen, and many others scarcely less distinguished. Never before had Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson been in such aristocratic company, and for the moment she entirely forgot how immeasurably she was now their social superior. She had held her own triumphantly with Lady Harriet, but that was different. There was only one of *her* – and that one a quite ordinary and insignificant personality compared with these imposingly splendid lords and ladies-in-waiting.

Mrs. Stimpson intended to be graciously cordial, but somehow her manner was dangerously near being obsequious. "Most *honoured*, I'm sure, Prince!" she found herself repeating, as she ducked instinctively. "So very kind of you to come, Baron!.. It's more than delightful to meet you, dear Princess – I didn't quite catch your name!.. *Such* a privilege to make your acquaintance, Countess!"

She hoped they would take this as condescension on her part, and they were undeniably surprised by their Sovereign's excessive affability.

"Well," said Mr. Stimpson, as these amenities became exhausted and he perceived that no one was taking any notice of him, "what about making a start, hey, Mr. Marshal?"

"If your Majesties and the Princess will deign to enter the coach, we can set forth at once," was the reply.

"Get in, children, get in!" cried Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson. "You and Ruby, Edna, must sit with your backs to the horses, and there will be plenty of room for Clarence between you."

"With all respect, Sir," said the Marshal, as Clarence was preparing to get in. "It is the custom on such an occasion as this for the Crown Prince to ride on the right of the Coach. I have arranged that a horse shall be at your Royal Highness's service."

"Thanks awfully," said Clarence, as he glanced at a spirited chestnut mare which two squires were endeavouring with some difficulty to soothe, "but – er – I think I'd rather drive." He was reflecting, as he took his seat in the coach, that he would really have to take a few riding lessons shortly, in private.

"Isn't Miss Heritage coming with us, Mummy?" called Ruby from the window.

"In the State Coach, my dear! Of course not!"

"But why not, Mater?" protested Clarence. "There's lots of room."

"Because I could not think of allowing it, Clarence. Perhaps Mrs. Fogleplug will be kind enough to give her a lift in – in her own conveyance."

"Unfortunately," replied the Court Godmother, "my car will not hold more than one person."

"Well, Miss Heritage must find her way to the Palace, then! There's no necessity for her to be present at the Coronation."

"Surely, my dear," said the Fairy, "you would not deprive her of such a privilege! I will have another saddle placed on that mare so that this fair maid of yours may ride with your other ladies in waiting."

"Of course, Mrs. Fogleplug, if you're *bent* on Miss Heritage making a public exhibition of herself," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "I have nothing to say. I don't suppose she has ever been on a horse in her life!"

"Oh, but I have, Ma'am!" Daphne pleaded eagerly. "I've ridden ever since I was a child. And I'd love to ride that mare, if I may!"

"Oh, very *well*, Miss Heritage, ve-ry well. But remember, if you break your neck, *I* shall not accept any responsibility," which Daphne took as a permission. As soon as Mr. and Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson had taken their seats, the sixteen milk-white horses began to pull and strain till eventually the great coach was on the way.

"Mummy," cried Ruby a little later, "I can see Miss Heritage! She's riding close behind. And oh, she *does* look so sweet on horseback!"

"Put your head in, – do, child!" said her mother sharply. "Whatever will the people think if they see a Princess hanging half out of the window like that!"

Ruby sat down rather sullenly. Clarence would have liked to put his own head out if it had been consistent with his dignity as a Prince. As it was, he could only hope that Daphne would come to no harm. "Really!" continued Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, "what with one's governess riding behind one's coach, and those two ridiculous bird-cars probably flapping overhead, this is *quite* unlike any Coronation Procession *I* ever heard of!"

"More like a bally Circus," remarked Clarence. "Only wants a couple of clowns with bladders on horseback and a performing elephant."

"*I* consider," said his mother, "that a State procession should have more solemnity about it... How horribly this coach jolts! It *can't* have any springs!... There you are again, Edna, buried in that note-book! you might show a little interest in what is going on!"

"I'm sorry, mother, but it all seems to mean so little to me."

"Then all I can say is – good gracious, *what* a lurch! I quite thought we were over! – all *I* can say is that it's unnatural to be so abstracted as you are. We're getting close to Eswar – whatever they call it. If you look round you will see the walls and towers."

Edna adapted her *pince-nez* and turned perfunctorily for a moment. "*Quite* quaint!" she said, and resumed her reading.

"Picturesque, *I* should call it," corrected her mother. "Sidney, doesn't it put you in mind of dear lovely Lucerne?"

"Very much so, my love," he replied, "or – er – Venice" (neither of which cities, as a matter of fact, did Eswar in the least resemble in the least). "Hullo! what are we stopping for *now*, eh?"

It seemed they had arrived at the principal gates of the Capital, where the Burgomaster and other civic dignitaries were assembled to welcome and to do them homage, which they did with every sign of respect and loyalty. As Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson felt unequal to the efforts of responding, that duty devolved on her husband, who presented himself at the window of the coach, and made what the reporters, had any been present, would no doubt have described as "a few gracious and appropriate remarks."

"You needn't have said that about 'doing our best to give satisfaction,' Sidney!" complained his wife after the coach had thundered over the drawbridge, and was lumbering under the massive archway into a narrow and crowded street, "for all the world as if we had been a butler and housekeeper applying for a situation!"

"It *was* a little unfortunate, perhaps, my dear," he admitted; "but it is so difficult to know what to say when one has to speak impromptu."

"It ought to be easy enough to know what *not* to say," she retorted. "Dear me, what hosts of people!" she went on, as her irritation merged into complacency. "And *how* pleased they all seem to see us! But no doubt, after a bachelor Regent, a whole Royal family – I love to see their happy smiling faces!"

"Grinning mugs would be nearer the mark, Mater," said Clarence; "never saw such a chuckle-headed lot of bumpkins in my life!"

"I will thank you to remember, Clarence," she replied, "that they are my loyal subjects, and will be *yours* at some time to come."

"I can *wait* for 'em," he said; "and if they're so jolly loyal, why ain't they cheering more?"

Slowly the golden coach progressed through winding streets of gabled or step-roofed houses with toppling overhanging stories, then along one side of a great square, packed with people in costume, the women recalling to Mrs. Stimpson's mind, quite inappropriately, the waitresses at the Rigi Kulm hotel on a Sunday. Then, through more narrow streets, to a smaller square, where it stopped at some steps leading to the huge West portal of a magnificent buttressed Church.

"All change here – for the Coronation!" said Clarence. "I'd better nip out first, eh, Mater?"

"Your father and I get out first, naturally, Clarence," said Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson, and descended majestically, Mr. Stimpson following with somewhat less effect owing to an attack of cramp in his left leg. Four small pages stepped forward in pairs to carry Mr. and Mrs. Stimpson's trains, which they found a distinct convenience, and, hand in hand, they passed through the great, elaborately niched and statued doorway into the nave. The interior was thronged by all the notables of Märchenland, including the venerable President of the Council and his Councillors. Above, the light struck in shafts through the painted windows of the clerestory, tinging the haze of incense fumes with faint colours. On the high altar twinkled innumerable tapers. "*Roman!* as I suspected!" whispered Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson on seeing them, and sniffing the scented atmosphere. (She had attended St. John's at Gablehurst, because the vicar, although Evangelical, was well-known to be of good family.) Under a crimson canopy in the choir were two golden chairs which they understood they were expected to sit upon, and occupied accordingly. A mitred and coped ecclesiastic, who appeared to be some kind of Bishop, then shepherded them benevolently through a series of mystic rites that, besides being hopelessly unintelligible, seemed unreasonably protracted. However, they reached the climax at last, and amidst the tumultuous acclamations of the spectators the previously anointed heads of King Sidney and Queen Selina, as they must henceforth be described, received their respective crowns.

"Ha, well," remarked King Sidney, when he and the rest of the Royal family were once more in the coach, and on their way towards the palace that was to be their future home, "we got through it most successfully on the whole. Perhaps the Bishop was a little too lavish with the anointing part of the ceremony. Still, taken altogether, it was – ah – a very solemnising affair."

"It would have been more so, Sidney," said the Queen, "if you hadn't kept on dropping your sceptre and tripping over your train. I don't wonder the Bishop got flustered. But I do wish we could have had it properly done by the dear Archbishop of Canterbury!"

"Bit out of his diocese, Märchenland, what?" said the Crown Prince.

"I'm aware of that, Clarence; and, of course, we're legally crowned, whoever did it... Sidney, it's only just struck me, but I'm sure we ought to be bowing. Bow, children, all of you – take the time from me. Sidney, why aren't *you* bowing?"

"I can't, my love. It's difficult enough to keep my crown on as it is!"

"You can hold it on with one hand, can't you? You simply *must* bow if you don't want to be unpopular! So must *you*, children. Keep *on* with it!"

"Give us a rest, Mater," said Prince Clarence, after they had been nodding like Chinese mandarins for some minutes. "My neck's beginning to wilt already!"

Queen Selina herself was not sorry to stop. "It's certainly very fatiguing at first," she admitted; "we must practise it together in private... Was that old Mrs. Fogleplug's dove-chariot that passed us just now? I'm afraid I shall have to put her in her place. She's rather inclined to forget herself – not only addressed me as 'my dear,' but actually attempted to kiss me after the Coronation!"

"So she did *me*!" said the Princess Royal, "but I hope I showed that I thought she was taking a liberty."

"She's a very worthy, well-meaning old creature, no doubt," remarked the Queen; "still, a Fairy Godmother in these days is really *rather* – I shall have to get her to retire – on a pension."

"She'll stick on," said Prince Clarence, "you see if she don't. Means to boss the whole show."

"I shall soon let her see that I intend to be mistress in my own Kingdom," said the Queen. "I could wish, I must say, that it was just a little more up to date! Everything so dreadfully behind the times! I haven't seen a shop yet with a plate-glass front, and not a single pillar-box!"

"Poor sort of place for Suffragettes, what?" observed Clarence.

"Frivolity apart, Clarence," remarked the Queen, "I can see already that there is much to be done here before the country can be called really civilised. We must set ourselves to raise the standard by introducing modern ideas – enlighten people's minds, and all the rest of it. And you must do *your* share, Sidney, as I shall do mine."

"Certainly," said the King; "I'm agreeable. All for progress myself. Always have been... I fancy that must be our Palace up there. A truly palatial residence – replete, I've no doubt, with every convenience we can require."

The State Coach, after making a leisurely circuit of the two sides of the principal square, was now beginning the ascent of the steep zigzag road to the Palace, which stood on the terraced height of the plateau that commanded the city. The party in the coach caught glimpses of its massive but ornate towers with fantastic spires and turrets, and its great arched and columned wings of rose-tinted marble. As it was rather larger than Windsor Castle, King Sidney's commendation was fairly justified.

But Queen Selina's mind was occupied in computing the probable number of rooms, and the maids that would be required to "do" them, while she wondered aloud whether they could possibly afford to keep such a place up.

"Depend upon it, my dear," said the King, "the – ah – State will provide an ample allowance for all our expenses. I must go into that as soon as an opportunity occurs, and find out exactly what our income will be."

Little more was said after this, as the great coach creaked and groaned slowly up the winding road, and then rolled through the golden gates into the courtyard of the Palace.

On the steps of the chief entrance were Marshal Federhelm, Baron von Eisenbänden, and the Court Godmother, who, with the rest of the Royal household, had hastened on ahead to receive them. The Marshal ushered them into the Hall of Entrance, which was immense and cool. There they found the ladies and gentlemen-in-waiting drawn up in curtsying and bowing ranks. The colours of their gay costumes would have been dazzling, had they not been somewhat toned down by the subdued light from the windows, which were paned with transparent agate set in tracery of a flamboyant type. At the back rose a colossal staircase of jasper. On either side were lofty doors leading to vestibules, corridors, and reception halls.

Judged by Gablehurst standards, the general effect of the interior was hardly 'home-y' or cosy enough to be perfectly satisfactory, as Queen Selina seemed to feel, for the only comment she made was: "No china punch-bowl for visiting-cards, I see!"

"I say," the Crown Prince inquired of the Marshal, "who's the small sportsman in the extinguisher hat?" he referred to an unassuming little man with long, lint-coloured hair and pale,

prominent eyes, whose shiftiness was only partly concealed by large horn spectacles. He wore black and crimson robes embroidered in gold with Zodiacal signs. "Looks like the Editor of Old Moore's Almanack."

"That, Sir," replied the Marshal, "is the learned Xuriel, our Astrologer Royal. Will your Majesties permit me to present him?" And, the Royal assent being given, he went across to fetch the sage.

"Xuriel, my friend," he said in his ear, with a slightly ironical intonation, "the august Sovereigns who owe their discovery to your learning and research are naturally anxious to express their acknowledgements. So come along and be presented, and perhaps you will produce a better impression if you can manage to look a little less like a hare with the ear-ache."

It was not, however, the prospect of being presented to Royalty that was disturbing the Astrologer Royal, but an unpleasant suspicion that the ex-Regent was, for some reason or other, a little annoyed with him.

"Your Majesties will be interested to hear," explained the Marshal, after making the presentation, "that Master Xuriel was at one time noted for his skill as a magician."

"My studies in Magic were never carried very far, your Majesties," protested the Astrologer, wriggling uncomfortably. "I – I did very little at it. And, even before it was decreed that all enchanters and sorcerers should either leave the Kingdom or take up some other profession, I had discovered that astrology was my true vocation."

"And you were right," said the Marshal heartily, "as results have shown. And doubtless there is no truth in the rumour that you still retain some proficiency in the Black Art."

"Absolutely none, your Majesties!" the Astrologer Royal declared. "What small skill I ever possessed, I have already forgotten; all my magic spells have long since been discarded."

"So I should hope," said Queen Selina severely. "Mr. Wibber – I mean, his Majesty and I are, of course, no believers in Magic, but we are determined not to allow any superstitions practices here in future – are we not, Sidney?"

"Certainly, my dear, certainly. Most undesirable. Of course, we don't object to ordinary conjuring – anything harmless of that sort. But take my advice, Sir, and stick to Astrology for the future – much more gentlemanly pursuit!"

The Astrologer Royal promised to observe this recommendation, and just then the Court Chamberlain announced that a meal had been prepared for the Royal Family in the King's Parlour, to which he offered to conduct them at once. And, as the lengthy business of the Coronation had given them all excellent appetites, they readily welcomed the proposal.

Princess Ruby, catching sight of Daphne in one of the groups, had begged that she might be included, which the Queen reluctantly granted as an exceptional indulgence.

Daphne would gladly have excused herself had that been possible; she was becoming painfully conscious of finding Mrs. Wibberley-Stimpson as a Queen irresistibly ludicrous. Once already that morning she had only just escaped detection, and she was horribly afraid now that something might happen which would lead her to betray herself by unseemly laughter. She could only pray inwardly that it would not, as she followed with Ruby to the King's Parlour.

This was a lofty hall with windows opening on to the terrace; the walls were composed of great slabs of malachite, and twisted columns of the same supported a ceiling of elaborately carved pink jade. At one end was a dais, where a table was spread with what King Sidney referred to somewhat disappointedly as "a cold snack," though he did it ample justice nevertheless.

The Marshal sat on his right hand; at his back stood the Court Chamberlain, while chubby-faced little pages served cakes of bread on bended knee, and filled the golden goblets with Märchenland's choicest wines, which the King considered "a trifle on the sour side." The Royal Household looked on from a distance – to the exquisite discomfort of the Queen.

"I really can't enjoy my food, Sidney," she complained in an undertone, "with every mouthful I take watched by all those members of the nobility!"

Suddenly she coloured with annoyance as she found she was being addressed in a gruff, strangled voice from a quarter it was difficult at first to locate. "Mr. Troitz," she demanded, "*who* is that ill-mannered person who seems to be trying to talk to Me with his mouth full?"

"The voice, your Majesty," he replied in the most matter-of-fact tone, "appears to proceed from the boar's head."

"How dare you try to impose on me by such a story? It's that wretched little astrologer man. Ventriloquism and Conjuring always go together, and I'll be bound he's underneath the table now!.. Well," she said, after she had satisfied herself by looking, "if he's not there, he's somewhere in the room!"

The Court Chamberlain assured her that the Astrologer Royal was not only absent, but incapable of such a liberty; it really *was* the boar's head that had spoken, as animals in Märchenland would on rare occasions – even after suffering decapitation.

"There was Falada, Mummy," cried Ruby eagerly. "Don't you remember? The horse that talked poetry after its head had been cut off and nailed over the arch! Miss Heritage can tell you all about it."

But Miss Heritage could not – she was far too deeply engaged in wrestling with an inward demon of unholy mirth that threatened at any moment to gain the mastery.

The head began again. But whatever felicitations, predictions, or warning it was striving to utter were rendered practically inarticulate by a large lemon that had been unfeelingly inserted between its jaws.

"Have the boar's head removed at once, Mr. Troitz," ordered Queen Selina. "I cannot and will not have it interrupting the conversation like this. It couldn't happen at all in any *civilised* country. Why, we shall have the cold tongue beginning next, I suppose!.."

It was here that poor Daphne's demon got the upper hand.

"You seem slightly hysterical, Miss Heritage," remarked the Queen. "Horse-exercise evidently has a very bad effect on your nerves, and I must forbid you to ride in future."

Thus was Daphne punished for her breach of etiquette. But Queen Selina had no suspicion, even then, of its real extent. She was incapable of conceiving that she could possibly seem ridiculous to one so infinitely her inferior.

CHAPTER V

DIGNITY UNDER DIFFICULTIES

The luncheon, after the removal of the too loquacious boar's head, proceeded, to Daphne's intense relief, without any further incident, and at its conclusion Queen Selina suggested a move to the terrace. One side of it faced the City far below; another the slope of the road leading immediately to the Courtyard, while from the third side steps descended by lower terraces to the Palace Gardens, which were apparently boundless. Beyond them, however, was a neglected region of groves and thickets, a sort of Wilderness, which stretched from the Garden boundaries to the edge of a plateau below which lay a wild valley, with a chain of wilder peaks and crags forming the horizon. But none of the Court had ever cared to explore the Wilderness, if they were even aware of its existence, so no more need be said of it at present.

The Royal Family leaned upon the parapet of the terrace, whence they had a bird's-eye view of the big square immediately below, and the picturesquely irregular buildings, above whose gabled red roofs grim watch-towers and quaint spires or cupolas rose here and there. Down in the square swarms of tiny figures were clustering round the public fountains, which spouted jets that, as they flashed in the afternoon sun, were seen to be of a purple hue.

"Must be wine," remarked the Crown Prince. "If it's the same tap we had at lunch, the poor devils have my sympathy!"

"I think, Sidney," said the Queen, "that we ought all to go for a drive presently – just round the principal streets. I'm sure the – a – populace would appreciate it."

"If you think it's expected of us, my love," he said. "Otherwise – well, I should have rather liked to see a little more of the Palace; we don't even know where our own bedrooms are to be yet."

"The Guv'nor's right there, Mater!" said Prince Clarence. "We'd better get settled down before we do anything else."

"Perhaps we had," Queen Selina allowed. "I'll get that good old Mrs. Fogleplug to take us round the house." And after sending for the Court Godmother, she started, accompanied by the family and several of her ladies-in-waiting, on a tour of inspection.

Possibly the suites of halls, each more magnificent than the last, the endless galleries and corridors, the walls decorated with sumptuous but bizarre hangings, the floors inlaid with marble and precious stones which were probably priceless and certainly slippery – possibly all these contributed towards the upsetting of Queen Selina's equanimity, but her manner was deplorably lacking in dignity and repose. She treated her ladies, for instance, with a politeness that came nearer subservience than ever. It was: "*Pray* go first, dear Princess Rapunzelhauser! After *you*, Baroness!.. Please, Countess, I really couldn't *think* of preceding you!" at every doorway, till Daphne, as she noted the elevated eyebrows and covert smiles of the others, felt too much shame for her Sovereign for any thought of amusement.

However, the Queen showed more self-assertion in her treatment of the Court Godmother, which was characterised by some *hauteur*.

"And now, I suppose, Mrs. Fogleplug, we have seen *all* the Reception Rooms. We shall probably have to entertain on rather a large scale, but they appear to be fairly suitable. What I have *not* yet seen is a room where I could receive ordinary callers. I have always made a practice since I was first married of being 'at Home' on the first and third Fridays, and though circumstances have altered, I intend to continue it."

The Fairy, though she was rather at a loss to understand either the reason or the necessity for this, said that there was a chamber called "The Queen's Bower" which would probably meet Her Majesty's requirements, and led the way to it accordingly.

It was about sixty feet square, with a high vaulted roof of lapis-lazuli set with large diamond stars; the walls were decorated with huge frescoes representing legends, many of which Princess Ruby recognised as familiar.

"This will do, Mrs. Fogleplug," pronounced the Queen. "At least it can be *made* to do, with a little re-arrangement. As it is, there are none of the ordinary refinements, such as art-cushions, cake-and-bread-and-butter stand, occasional tables, and little silver knick-knacks, which a lady's boudoir of any pretensions to elegance should have. Just the trifles that express the owner, and – er – constitute Home. I must have all these provided before I can use this as a sanctum. I should certainly have expected a Palace like this to be furnished with more regard to comfort!"

"I should have expected a billiard-room or two," said Prince Clarence; "but these Courtier chaps tell me they don't even know what billiards are! Pretty sort of Palace this!"

"I think it's a perfectly lovely Palace!" Princess Ruby declared. "It hasn't got a single piano in it anywhere! I know, because I've asked."

"I'm sorry to hear it, my dear," said her Mother, "because I particularly wished Miss Heritage to get you on with your music; and, if that is impossible, I shall have to consider whether I can keep her at all."

"Oh, Mummy, you won't send her away? When you know I've never been good with anybody before, and never *shall* be, either!"

Queen Selina was quite alive to the advantages of retaining Daphne's services.

"Well, Ruby," she said, "I shall allow Miss Heritage to stay on, as your companion" (she had already seen her way to proposing a reduction of salary), "and she can make herself generally useful to me as well."

Ruby went dancing back to Daphne. "You're not to be my governess any more, Miss Heritage, dear," she announced, "because I shan't require one now. But I've got Mummy to let you stay on as companion. Aren't you glad?"

Daphne answered that she was – and she would certainly have been sorry to leave Märchenland quite so soon.

"And now tell me, Mr. Chamberlain – Baron Troitz, I mean," the Queen was saying. "What time do you dine here?"

"Whenever your Majesties please," was the reply.

"All the same to us," said the King affably. "No wish to put you *out* at all."

"Then with your permission, Sire, the Banquet will be served an hour hence in the Banqueting Hall."

"A banquet!" cried the Queen. "I would rather we dined quietly, without any fuss, on our first night here."

"It is the night of your Majesties' Coronation," the Court Chamberlain reminded her. "The Court would be deeply disappointed if so auspicious an event were not celebrated in a befitting manner."

"Oh," said the Queen. "Then it will be full dress, I suppose – with crowns?"

"I hope – not *crowns*," put in King Sidney, who had taken the earliest opportunity of leaving his own in a corner. "A crown is such an uncomfortable thing to eat in. At least mine is."

The Court Chamberlain gave it as his decision that crowns should certainly be worn – at least through the earlier courses of the meal.

"All you've got to do, Guv'nor," said Clarence, "is to keep yours from splashing into the soup. A bit of elastic round your chin would do that all right."

"And I presume," said the Queen, "we shall wear these robes we have on?.. Oh, we shall find a change of costume upstairs? Then, as there is not too much time for dressing, I should like to see my room at once, Mrs. Fogleplug."

"Sidney," she panted a little later as, escorted by the Marshal and Baron, and followed by the Court Godmother and the ladies and lords-in-waiting, they were making the ascent of the grand staircase, "one of the *first* things we must do here is to put in a lift. I really can't be expected to climb all these stairs several times a day!"

"They do take it out of one, my dear," he admitted. "And a lift would certainly be a great improvement."

At the head of the staircase was a long tapestry-hung gallery in which were the doors opening into the suites of rooms prepared for Royalty.

Queen Selina, on reaching hers, could not bring herself to allow her ladies of the Bedchamber to assist at her toilet. "So *very* kind of you, Princess, and you, too, my dear Baroness," she protested, "but I couldn't *think* of troubling you – I couldn't indeed! I should feel quite ashamed to let you! I can manage perfectly well by myself – that is, Miss Heritage will come in after she has attended to Princess Ruby, and do all I require, and then she can go on and help *you*, Edna."

"Thank you, Mother," said Edna, "but I should prefer having some one who is more accustomed to dressing hair."

After putting Ruby into a robe of golden tissue and silken stockings and satin shoes, which, being quite as splendid as those she had just laid aside, afforded the child intense satisfaction, Daphne went to Queen Selina's Tiring Chamber – a spacious apartment with hangings of strange colours embroidered with Royal emblems. It was separated by a curtained arch, through which a glimpse could be caught of the Royal Bedchamber, with the colossal and gorgeously canopied State bed.

She found the Queen still in an early stage of her toilette and in a highly fractious state of mind.

"I expected you to be here before this, Miss Heritage," she said. "I've been waiting all this time for you to fasten me up the back, which I couldn't possibly ask any of my Court ladies to do... I'm sure *I* don't know what goes on next!.. Oh, do you think the – er – stomacher *before* the ruff?.. Very well... It's impossible to judge the effect in such a wretched light" (the chamber, it should be said, was illuminated by a number of perfumed flambeaux stuck in elaborately wrought silver sconces). "Even at 'Inglegarth' I had a pair of electric lights over my dressing-table! And how on earth any Queen can be expected to dress at a shabby tarnished old cheval-glass like this is more than *I* can conceive!"

Upon which a thin but silvery voice immediately responded:

"As dimly can I understand
How *you* are Queen of Märchenland!"

"Upon my word, Miss Heritage!" exclaimed Queen Selina, with an angry flush on her oatmeal-hued cheeks, "I am surprised at such impertinence – from *you*!"

"It – it wasn't me, Ma'am," said Daphne, with an heroic effort to keep her countenance.

"As it was certainly not myself, and you are the only other person in the room, Miss Heritage, your denial is impudent as well as useless!"

Daphne could only point speechlessly to the mirror.

"Really, Miss Heritage! This goes beyond all – what *next*!"

"Reflected here there should have been
A younger and far fairer Queen."

continued the voice in a doggerel as devoid of polish as the mirror itself.

"It *does* appear to come from – but whoever heard of a looking-glass talking?" said the mystified Queen.

"Little Snow-white's Stepmother had a mirror that answered her, Ma'am," said Daphne, "and she was a queen in Märchenland, I believe. Perhaps this is the very one!"

It would, no doubt, have proceeded to make some even more unflattering comments if Daphne had not, with much presence of mind, turned its face to the wall. How she knew that this would silence it she could not have said herself. But it certainly did.

"I have no reason for believing that any such person as Little Snow-white ever existed," said Queen Selina; "but whoever that glass belonged to, I will not have it here. I would have it smashed, if it wasn't unlucky. But it must be removed to the attics before I come up here to undress. Really, I never knew such a country as this is! Boar's heads trying to speak at luncheon, and mirrors making personal remarks, and everything so strange and unnatural! But you take it all as a matter of course, Miss Heritage; nothing seems to surprise *you*."

"I think, Ma'am," said Daphne, "because I've always known that, if I ever *did* get to Märchenland, it would be very much like this."

"Considering that you had no better means of knowing what it would be like than I had myself," replied the Queen, "I can only ascribe that to affectation... Surely there must be more of the Crown jewellery than I have been given as yet?... Yes, there *may* be something in that chest... Good gracious me! *What* diamonds! I don't think the dear Duchess of Gleneagles herself can have anything to approach them!.. Yes, you can put me on a *rivière*, and two of the biggest ropes of pearls... It won't do to go down looking dowdy. Dear me," she added, as she took up the pendant she had bought from Daphne twenty-four hours before, "to think of my giving so much money for this paltry thing! If I had known then what I do now, I should never have – but, of course, I don't mean that I should think of going back on it."

"I'm afraid, Ma'am," said Daphne, "I couldn't pay it back now; I sent the cheque last night."

"I am quite content to bear the loss, Miss Heritage. And, by the way, you may not be aware of it, but it is hardly correct or usual, in speaking to me, to call me 'Ma'am.'"

"I've always understood, Ma'am," said Daphne, "that our own Queen – in England, I mean –"

"How the Queen of England may allow herself to be addressed is entirely her own affair," said Queen Selina handsomely; "I have nothing whatever to do with *that*. But I am Queen of Märchenland, Miss Heritage, and I shall be obliged by your addressing me as 'Your Majesty' on *all* occasions."

"Certainly, your Majesty," said Daphne, executing a profound curtsy with a little smile that she was quite unable to repress. "I assure your Majesty that your Majesty may rely on my addressing your Majesty as 'Your Majesty' for the future, your Majesty."

"That is better, Miss Heritage, much better – a little overdone, but still – And now," she added, "you had better go and see if Princess Edna wants any assistance. You need not trouble to change your own dress, as, of course, you will not sit down to dinner with us."

"She's too priceless!" thought Daphne, when she was outside on the gallery, and could indulge her sense of humour in safety. "Still, I don't think I *could* stand her very long if it weren't for Ruby!"

"I say, Mater," the Crown Prince called out a few minutes afterwards outside his Mother's door, "how much longer are you and the Guv'nor going to be? All night?"

"You can come in, Clarence," she said. "How soon your Father will be ready, I can't say. I finished *my* dressing hours ago."

King Sidney, following her example, had declined the good offices of his gentlemen, and there were sounds from his dressing-room on the farther side of the Bedchamber which indicated that he was in some difficulties in consequence.

"My aunt!" exclaimed Clarence as he saw his Mother fully arrayed. "You've got 'em all on *this* time, Mater, and no mistake! So've you, Guv'nor," he added, as King Sidney joined them with

rather a sheepish air. "Only – are you sure you've got yours on *right*? I mean to say – that ruff looks a bit cock-eyed."

"It's given me more trouble than any white tie, my boy – but it must do as it is."

"Ah, I got that bristly-haired chap – what's his name – Hansmeinigel – to put on mine for me. Didn't any of yours give you a hand?"

"They offered to – most kindly," said King Sidney, "but – well, I didn't altogether relish letting them dress me."

"They'd have made a jolly sight neater job of it than you have – keep still a jiff till I've tucked this tape in. There – that's more like it. And I say, you and the Mater had better hurry – you're keeping the whole Court waiting for you!"

"Why didn't you tell us before?" said the Queen in a violent flurry. "Where – where *are* the Court?"

"All drawn up in the Hall at the foot of the big staircase. They can't make a move till you come down, and lead the way in to dinner, you know!"

"I – I'd rather not descend all those steps in public," objected the King. "Confoundedly slippery. Er – couldn't we go by the backstairs, my love?"

"And find ourselves in our own kitchen!" said the Queen. "Certainly not, Sidney! The grand staircase is the only dignified way down, and you had better give me your arm at once."

"Very well, my dear, very well. But I'm pretty sure I shall slip."

"You must *not* slip, Sidney! Neither of us must slip. If we did, it would produce a very bad impression. Still, it will be safer if we go down one by one, and hold on to the banisters."

"No, I say," cried the Crown Prince, "you can't do that – might as well crawl down on all fours! Buck up, both of you. Try and throw a little swank into it!"

Their Majesties accomplished the descent amidst the congratulatory blare of the silver trumpets without actual mishap. But there was nothing in the bearing of either Sovereign that could justly be described by the term "swank," and indeed, if any fault could be found, it would have been in quite the opposite direction.

Of the banquet itself little need be said here. The numerous courses were appetising and admirably served, while, to the Queen's relief, none of the dishes showed any desire to take part in the conversation.

The members of the Court did more than look on this time, being entertained, with other guests, amongst whom were the President and Council, at cross tables below the principal one on the dais.

Clarence, seated with his family, the Ex-Regent, and the Court Godmother at the high table, wished more than once that he could have sat by Daphne, whom he could see at no great distance. He noted her perfect ease, and the pretty graciousness with which she received the attentions which her neighbours seemed only too anxious to press upon her.

"Anyone would think she'd lived with swells all her life," he thought. "She may have, for anything I know!" But, of course, even if she had, the fact did not make her his equal now.

Towards the close of the feast King Sidney, who had long since disposed of his crown underneath his chair, considered that the occasion demanded a speech. His effort might have been a greater success if he had abstained from jocularities, which was not by any means his *forte*. It is possible that a far happier sample of British humour would have failed to set Märchenland tables in a roar, but his hearers were either unaware that he intended to be humorous, or sensible that his purpose had not been achieved, for they listened in puzzled but depressed silence, while the effect of his facetiousness on Daphne was to render her hot and cold by turns.

The banquet over, the Court Chamberlain deferentially informed the Royal Party that they were expected to lead the procession to the Ball Room.

Clarence, who had unfortunately come away from "Inglegarth" without his cigarette-case, was longing to smoke, and hung behind for that purpose. But on applying to the Marshal, he was told that only common soldiers ever smoked in Märchenland. With some trouble a highly flavoured pipe, a tinder-box, and a pouch containing a dried herb that appeared to be the local substitute for tobacco were procured for him. However, a very short experience convinced him that duty required him to put in an appearance at the State Ball.

The Ball Room was a long, lofty hall, lit by thousands of candles set in great golden hoops; the light they gave being multiplied almost to infinity by the fact that the walls and ceiling were lined with elaborately engraved looking-glass, which, fortunately perhaps for the Queen, was dumb. When he entered, the musicians were already fiddling, piping, and fluting in a gallery high up at one end facing a raised platform, where his father and mother, looking extremely hot and uncomfortable, were seated on gorgeous chairs. A stately measure was being performed, which might have been a *gavotte* or minuet or *pavane* for anything he could say; all he knew was that the figures were quite unfamiliar to him.

But Daphne seemed to have learnt them – or had they come to her by instinct? – for she was dancing in one of the sets. He watched her lissome form as she moved through the intricate evolutions till he began to envy the Count von Daumerlingstamm, her elegant but undersized partner. However, he flattered himself that he would have no difficulty in cutting out little Daumerlingstamm.

It seemed to him that that dance would never be over, but the moment it was, he made his way to Daphne with an air that showed he was fully aware of the distinction he was conferring. "Enjoying yourself, Miss Heritage?" he said. "Don't know what that last dance was – but not much 'vim' about it, if you ask *me*. Tell you what – I'll get those fiddler fellows up there to play something a bit livelier, and you and I'll show this crowd a two-step, what?"

"This is a great honour, your Royal Highness," said Daphne, after sinking demurely in the regulation curtsy. "But I must not accept it until I have her Majesty's permission." ("Which I'm quite sure she won't give!" she thought to herself with much satisfaction.)

"Oh, I say – what rot! The Mater won't mind! And if she does – !"

"It would be very disagreeable for me, your Royal Highness!"

"Oh, well," he said, "I'll go and ask her."

As Daphne had anticipated, Queen Selina's refusal was most emphatic. "You ought to know, Clarence, that it's utterly out of the question!" she said. "And I'm surprised at Miss Heritage having the presumption to expect it."

"She didn't, Mater. She said I'd better ask you first."

"Then it seems she has a better sense of her position than you have of yours, Clarence. I'm told you have been seen walking about with a disgusting pipe in your mouth, and that several people were remarking on it. Now you are actually proposing to make yourself conspicuous by dancing at a State Ball with your sister's companion! I have always credited you with being a man of the world – but if *this* is the way you are going on – !"

He felt the sting of so unwonted a rebuke. "I daresay you're right, Mater," he acknowledged. "I'll be more careful after this."

"I hope you will, I'm sure. As Crown Prince you mustn't *think* of any partner under the rank of Baroness. Ask one of the Princesses first, or you'll give *more* offence."

"Right-oh!" was all he said, and, feeling that it would be awkward to make any explanation or excuses to Daphne, he solved the difficulty by avoiding her for the rest of the evening.

Princess Goldernenfingerleinigen, a prepossessing but not very forthcoming damsel, enjoyed the distinction of being commanded by the Crown Prince as his first partner.

He had had no experience in conversing with Princesses, and she did not exert herself either to put him more at his ease or prevent him from losing himself frequently in the mazes of the dance.

Once or twice he was oppressed by a painful suspicion that he had seen her making a little grimace of self-pity at the Countess Gänsehirtin. But elaborately engraved mirrors are not very trustworthy, and he might have been mistaken. Still, he was thankful when the dance, in which he was conscious of having done himself so little credit, came to an end.

"Edna, old girl," he remarked subsequently to the Princess Royal, "I call this a rotten ball. Can't stick dancing with any more of these Princesses!"

Princess Edna, it appeared, had been no more favourably impressed by the Courtiers.

"They've simply *no* conversation," she complained, "and no ideas about any serious subjects!"

"No, I've noticed that," he said; "and they think they're the only people who can dance! I tell you what – you and I'll show 'em how we do the Tango. That'll make 'em open their eyes!"

It did. As has already been said, both he and Edna, as persons who could not afford to be out of the movement, had taken lessons that winter in the recent importation from dubious Argentine dancing-saloons. They danced it now with conscientious care, Prince Clarence exhibiting as much *abandon* as a man could who was dancing with his sister.

But the Court were not sufficiently enlightened to appreciate the performance. They evidently considered it not only uncouth and undignified, but more than a little improper, and their general attitude conveyed that the couple were committing one of those temporary indiscretions which it was not only etiquette but charity to pass over in silence.

"Capital!" said King Sidney, clapping his hands at the conclusion. "Uncommonly well they dance together, eh, my dear – never seen them do it before."

"And you will never see them do it again, Sidney," replied the Queen; "for I'm much mistaken if they haven't broken up the Ball!"

She was not very far wrong, for although, after some minutes of awestruck silence, dancing was resumed, it was carried on with a restraint and gloom that soon decided the Royal Family to retire from the Ball Room.

The Queen forbore from expressing her sentiments just then either to her son or daughter, with the latter of whom, indeed, she seldom, if ever, ventured to find fault. But she felt that her first evening in the Palace had not been a brilliant success.

This feeling impelled her to be more ingratiating than ever to her ladies of the Bedchamber, whose services in disrobing her she was compelled to accept, though under protest.

"So *much* obliged!" she said, as they finally withdrew with glacial ceremony. "Quite ashamed to have troubled you, really! Good-night, dear Princess, *good-night*. We shall breakfast at 8.30. But *en famille*, you know – quite *en famille* – so don't *dream* of coming down!"

"I hope, Sidney," she began later, as he joined her in the Royal Bedchamber, "I hope you have treated the gentlemen who undressed you with proper consideration. It is *so* important... Good gracious! What's that you've got on? A night-cap?"

"Those – er – noblemen seemed to consider it the correct thing, my love, and they've put me on this night-gown, too."

"I see they have. Embroidered all over with impossible animals. You look a perfect *sight* in it!"

"I'm told they're – er – hippogriffs, my dear, the – ah – Royal Crest or emblem or something. I should have much preferred pyjamas myself. But it seems they are not procurable here."

"Everything in this country is in a disgracefully backward state!" declared the Queen; "and I can see I shall have hard work to bring it up to my ideas of what is proper. I shall *begin* by putting that old Mrs. Fogleplug in her proper place."

"I should be careful, my dear," advised King Sidney. "After all, you know, she's by way of being a Fairy."

"So she *says*! But, Fairy or no Fairy, she's much too familiar. And if she cannot conform to my rules, she will have to go, that's all."

"Well, my dear, I daresay when you put it to her like that," began the King, who had by this time succeeded in clambering into the immense bed, and whose head was already buried in an enormous pillow. "As I was saying," he continued hazily, "put it to her in – in that way, and – and – no doubt ... very probably ... no reason to suppose ... any..." But here his voice sank into an unintelligible murmur, until it rose presently into his first, but not by any means last, snore in the character of monarch.

CHAPTER VI

CARES OF STATE

Queen Selina was as good as her word. The first thing after breakfast the next morning she retired to her Bower, and sent a summons to the Court Godmother, desiring her immediate attendance. King Sidney was engaged in interviewing the Lord Treasurer on the subject of the Royal revenue. The Crown Prince and Princess Edna were strolling on the terrace, and Daphne had discovered the board and pieces of a game something between Chess and Halma, the rules of which she and Princess Ruby were learning under the instruction of the Countess von Haulemännerschen. So that the Queen, having taken care not to disturb any of her ladies-in-waiting, could count upon being able to deal faithfully with the obnoxious old Fairy without fear of interruption.

"Well, my dear," began the latter, as soon as she appeared, "I hope you passed a comfortable night?"

"I don't know when I passed a *more* uncomfortable one, Mrs. Fogleplug. That is *one* of the things I wished to speak to you about. After being accustomed as I have to a spring mattress, all those great feather beds made it simply impossible to get a wink of sleep!"

"That," said the Fairy, "is one of the penalties of being of the blood Royal. An ancestress of yours slept in that very bed, my dear, ages ago, before even *I* can remember – or I should rather say she *tried* to sleep, but could not, owing to a pea that had somehow got under the lowest feather-bed of all. It was certainly very careless if the pea has never been removed."

"It would also show, Mrs. Fogleplug, that during all those ages the bed can never have been properly aired. I should have thought it would have been *your* business to see to that."

"Then you would be entirely mistaken, my dear, for it is not. And, as I notice that you find a difficulty in pronouncing my name correctly, I may suggest that it would be simpler in future to call me by my proper title, which is, 'High Court Godmother,' or 'Court Godmother,' if you prefer it."

"And while we are on the subject of titles," said Queen Selina, "I may mention that it is customary to address a Queen as 'Your Majesty,' and not as 'my dear.'"

"It has always been my habit with Sovereigns, and I have never heard it objected to till now."

"Well, *I* object to it. But – and this is what I sent for you about – there are other matters I object to even more. I intend to regulate my household on a thoroughly modern and English system, and I cannot have any member of it careering about in the air in outlandish cars drawn by birds. If you *must* have a conveyance you must be content with a brougham or a victoria, for I shall insist on your putting down both those bird-cars."

"You seem to forget that, but for one of them, you would never have come into your Kingdom!"

"That may or may not be. At any rate there is no further necessity for them, and – well, it just comes to this, Madam, either they go or you do."

The old Fairy's eyes smouldered with anger, and her nut-cracker mouth and chin champed for a few seconds before she replied.

"I have occupied rooms in this Palace – when not at the Palace of Clairdelune – for over a century and a half, and I have no intention of giving them up. I shall also continue to use the vehicles which I find most convenient."

"Oh?" said the Queen, "will you? We shall *see* about that!"

"We shall," the Court Godmother retorted. "I don't think you quite realise yet whom you have to deal with. I may be getting on in years, but both here and at Clairdelune I am accustomed to being treated with more deference and respect than you seem disposed to pay me. You see, they know that, although I have not used the full powers I possess as a Fairy for many years past, I have

not lost them altogether. I might see fit to employ them once more – on any person who was rash enough to incur my displeasure. And ingratitude and pride are the failings which I always made it my particular business to correct. You would find it more to your advantage to be on good terms with me." There was no mistaking the veiled threat, and Queen Selina no longer doubted the Fairy's abilities to carry it out. She was worsted, and her only course was to give in gracefully.

"My *dear* Court Godmother!" she cried, "you *quite* misunderstood me! I'd no wish to interfere with any of your habits – not in the very slightest degree. All I *meant* was that, perhaps, at your age, a more ordinary carriage than your present ones might be – er —*safer*, you know!"

"I am quite capable of looking after my own safety, thank you. But, though you are our beloved Prince's daughter, you have been brought up in ignorance of the ways of this country, so I am the more willing to overlook treatment to which I feel sure I shall not have to draw your attention again. And now, as we quite understand one another, my dear, we will say no more about it. By the way, I hear you haven't sent for any of your ladies-in-waiting this morning. How is that?"

"I – I didn't quite like to, Court Godmother. We're – well, hardly intimate as yet. They are so reserved and distant – especially that Princess Rapunzelhauser. But, of course, she comes of a very high family."

"She is descended from the famous Rapunzel, whose story is no doubt familiar to you... No? Well, her father was a poor cottager who was caught by an old witch stealing radishes from her garden. She let him off on condition that he gave up to her the child his wife was expecting. Rapunzel was the child, and in due time was claimed by the witch, who shut her up in a lofty tower. However, she had the most wonderful hair, so long that when she let it down from the top window it touched the ground, and so thick that the Prince whom she subsequently married was able to climb up by it, and make love to her."

"Now you mention it, I have some faint recollection – and so Princess Rapunzelhauser is descended from *her*! Well, that would account for – but Princess Goldenenfinger – something, now, she *does* look as if she had *some* good blood in *her* veins."

"The best in Märchenland. An ancestor of hers was King of one of the smaller Kingdoms into which the country was divided in those days. One day when out hunting he found a woodcutter's daughter living all alone in a hollow tree, and fell violently in love with her."

"A *woodcutter's* daughter? Dear me! Then, of course, marriage was out of the question."

"Not at all! they were married and had children. Unfortunately there was an estrangement between the King and Queen later as she was accused of having murdered them, and condemned to be burnt to death."

"It only shows what a mistake it is to marry beneath one."

"*This* marriage ended happily. It was discovered, just in time, that the children were alive after all."

"Still," said the Queen, "it is *not* a pleasant thing to have happened in *any* family. I should like to hear something about the pedigrees of my other ladies-in-waiting."

The Court Godmother was quite ready to give her all the information she could. Princess Flachspinnenlosburg, it appeared, traced her descent from the incorrigibly lazy daughter of a poor and not over scrupulous mother; Baroness Belohnte von Haulemännerschen from similarly humble folk, whose daughter was servant of all work to seven dwarfs, and afterwards married the King of one of the petty states before mentioned; Baroness von Bauerngrosstochterheimer's ancestor was a peasant; Countess Gänsehirtin am Brunnen's ancestress a goose-girl – and so on through the entire list. Queen Selina then became curious as to the origin of the gentlemen of her Court, and found that many of their forbears were sullied by the taint of Trade. The founders of both Prince Tapfer von Schneiderleinberg's and Count Daumerlingenstamm's houses were tailors; Baron von Bohnenranken derived his title from a speculator who, after a remarkably unsuccessful venture in cattle, had made a colossal coup in beans. As for Prince Hansmeinigel, his pretensions to high

descent were even more questionable – at least, if it was actually the fact, as the Fairy stated, that the first of his progenitors was not only the son of a poor father, but also suffered the additional social disadvantage of being a hedgehog from the waist upwards; added to which he seemed to have cherished an eccentric passion for playing the bagpipes while riding on a cock. It is true that, after his marriage with a Princess, he became a less impossible member of Society – still, as the Queen very rightly felt, there are some things which can never be altogether lived down.

"I'm much obliged to you for telling me all this, Court Godmother," she said, at the end; "*most* interesting, I'm sure. And so useful to know who everybody really *is*!"

It was something of a disillusion to find that her Court was so largely composed of *parvenus*, but, on the other hand, it enabled her to face her ladies-in-waiting in future without any distressing sense of inferiority.

She was on the point of summoning them when the King suddenly burst into her bower. "Selina, my love," he began, with suppressed excitement, "if you'll tell this good woman to go, I've something to say to you."

"Oblige me, Sidney," replied the Queen, "by not alluding to the High Court Godmother again as a good woman; we may consider ourselves very fortunate that she is doing us the honour of residing under our roof, and you will be good enough to show her proper respect."

"Oh, sorry, I'm sure; I thought you said – but if *that's* how it is, I apologise for interrupting you."

"I have said all I have to say," said the Court Godmother, "so there is no need for me to remain any longer." And with that she hobbled out of the room.

"I suppose you got your way about those – ah – bird-chariots, my dear?" he asked, "as you don't seem to have sacked her!"

"She seemed so upset at the idea of giving them up that I said she might keep them. I shall certainly not 'sack' her, as you call it. Now I've come to know her better, I find she is a good, faithful old soul who is much too useful to part with, and you must be very careful to be civil to her in future. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

"The Lord Treasurer and I have been going into our private resources," he said. "I thought perhaps you might like to come with me to my Counting-house and – and have a look at 'em, my dear."

She was only too eager to do so. "Tell me, Sidney," she gasped, as they hurried through various corridors to the wing in which the King's Counting-house was situated. "Shall we – shall we have enough to live on decently?"

"I don't know what *you* will think," he replied, with an irrepressible chuckle, "but I should call it affluence myself – positive affluence, my love!"

They arrived at a heavily clamped door, where the Marshal, the Treasurer, and Prince Clarence and Princess Edna were waiting for them. "Two steps down," said King Sidney after unlocking the door.

"And here we *are*!" he cried triumphantly, as they entered.

The Counting-house was a huge barrel-roofed chamber lighted from windows protected by elaborate scroll-work bars. Upon shelves all round the walls, and piled in heaps on the floor, were sacks, "Every blessed one," explained the King, "chock full of gold ducats! What do you think of *that*, eh, my love?"

"I think, Sidney," she replied, "that *I* am the person who should have the key."

"There's one for each of us," he said. "Here's yours. And on that table there you'll find purses laid out, and a little gold shovel to fill them with. I've filled mine. Whenever our funds are running low, you see, we've only to come down here and help ourselves."

"Good biz!" said the Crown Prince, beginning to fill one of the purses. "I shall fill my pockets as well – save another journey, what?"

"Some of us do not possess pockets, Clarence," said his mother. "And I must make it a rule that no one is to take out more than a purseful at a time, and only after satisfying me that the money is required for some legitimate purpose."

"I don't think such precautions are at all necessary, my dear," said King Sidney. "Marshal Federhelm seems to have put by a good deal while he was Regent. And besides, there's plenty more where *this* comes from, you know!"

"And where *does* it come from?" inquired the Queen.

"Why, the Treasurer tells me, we've a mine of our own in the Golden Mountains a few miles from here – a mine that is practically – ah – inexhaustible. I rather thought of driving over to see it some day."

"Let's all go!" said the Crown Prince. "Why not this afternoon? It'll be something to do!"

Queen Selina was pleased to approve the suggestion. "We certainly ought to show that we are interested in industrial concerns," she said. "All the *best* Sovereigns do. I can't help wishing, though, that poor dear Papa could have come with us. He knew so much about gold mines."

"Just as well for us he can't," said Clarence, "because *he'd* be the Boss, then! I say, I've got an idea. Why not take one of those sacks in the coach with us and chuck money out of the window to the crowd, what?"

"Look too much as if we were out for a beanfeast, my boy," objected his father.

"And what's the matter with a beanfeast? Believe me, it will make us jolly popular and be a lot better fun than just bowing to the blighters."

"And far less fatiguing," said Edna.

"There's something in what Clarence says," said the Queen. "It *would* increase our popularity – and that is so important. Of course we shouldn't make a *practice* of it, but we can quite afford it, just for once – what do you think, Mr. Marshal?"

The Marshal thought it was an excellent notion.

The Golden Mountains were not much more than a couple of leagues from Eswareinmal, and the roads being tolerably good, a lighter vehicle than the State Coach and six sturdy horses accomplished the journey in very good time. In the streets they passed through and at various villages along the valley, crowds had collected, and the enthusiasm with which they scrambled for the coins that were showered from the carriage windows proved how fully they appreciated the benefits of an established Monarchy.

"Don't throw any more now, children," counselled Queen Selina as they neared the mine. "We must keep some for the dear miners. Sidney, be sure to ask some questions about the machinery, and whether they're all happy and comfortable. And do it tactfully, because I've always heard miners are such a very independent and intelligent class."

Perhaps even so short a residence in Märchenland as theirs might have prepared the Royal party for the unusual. But it was an undeniable shock to them all to find, on arrival at the mine, not only that the method of working was primitive to the last degree, but that it was entirely conducted by diminutive beings who were unmistakable Yellow Gnomes. The interior of the mine resounded with the blows of pickaxes, but the inevitable trumpeters had no sooner announced that the Sovereigns had left their coach than all work was suspended. The miners swarmed up from their tunnellings, literally tumbling over one another in their haste to behold the countenances of Royalty.

"They seem – ah – a remarkable lively lot," observed King Sidney as some of the Gnomes turned somersaults and Catherine wheels around their visitors, while the more retiring stood unassumingly in the background on their heads. "A bit undersized, and, judging from their complexions, I should say the work had affected their livers. But it *may* only be due to the gold-dust."

"They don't seem to realise a bit who we *are*!" complained Queen Selina. "Sidney, *did* you see that? One of the little wretches has just taken a flying leap over my very head!"

The Baron, who had followed in another coach, explained that these demonstrations were merely intended to express loyal delight.

"Oh, if you *say* so, Baron," she said. "But anyone might easily mistake it for impertinence. If it was not hopeless to expect an intelligent answer from people who seem unable to stay right side up for a single moment, I should like to know what wages they receive and what they live on."

The Court Chamberlain informed her that the Gnomes got no wages and required little in the way of food, their favourite diet, he believed, being earth.

"Revolting!" was her comment. "No wonder they look so unwell! Still, their living cannot cost much, so I should think, Sidney, if we gave the – er – foreman a gold piece to be divided amongst them, that would be amply sufficient."

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