

A Prisoner in Fairyland



Algernon Blackwood

Algernon Blackwood

A Prisoner in Fairyland

PUBLISHER NOTES:

Quality of Life, Freedom, More time with the ones you Love.

Visit our website: LYFREEDOM.COM

"Les Pensees! O leurs essors fougueux, leurs flammes dispersees, Leur
rouge acharnement ou leur accord vermeil! Comme la-haut les etoiles
criblaient la nue, Elles se constellaient sur la plaine inconnue; Elles
roulaient dans l'espace, telles des feux, Gravissaient la montagne,
illuminaient la fleuve Et jetaient leur parure universelle et neuve De mer
en mer, sur les pays silencieux."
Le Monde, EMILE VERHAEREN

Chapter 1

1 Man is his own star; and the soul that can Render an honest and a perfect man Commands all light, all influence, all fate, Nothing to him falls early, or too late. Our acts our angels are, or good or ill, Our fatal shadows that walk by us still. BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

Minks—Herbert Montmorency—was now something more than secretary, even than private secretary: he was confidential-private-secretary, adviser, friend; and this, more because he was a safe receptacle for his employer's enthusiasms than because his advice or judgment had any exceptional value. So many men need an audience. Herbert Minks was a fine audience, attentive, delicately responsive, sympathetic, understanding, and above all—silent. He did not leak. Also, his applause was wise without being noisy. Another rare quality he possessed was that he was honest as the sun. To prevaricate, even by gesture, or by saying nothing, which is the commonest form of untruth, was impossible to his transparent nature. He might hedge, but he could never lie. And he was 'friend,' so far as this was possible between employer and employed, because a pleasant relationship of years' standing had established a bond of mutual respect under conditions of business intimacy which often tend to destroy it.

Just now he was very important into the bargain, for he had a secret from his wife that he meant to divulge only at the proper moment. He had known it himself but a few hours. The leap from being secretary in one of Henry Rogers's companies to being that prominent gentleman's confidential private secretary was, of course, a very big one. He hugged it secretly at first alone. On the journey back from the City to the suburb where he lived, Minks made a sonnet on it. For his emotions invariably sought the safety valve of verse. It was a wiser safety valve for high spirits than horse-racing or betting on the football results, because he always stood to win, and never to lose. Occasionally he sold these bits of joy for half a guinea, his wife pasting the results neatly in a big press album from which he often read aloud on Sunday nights when the children were in bed. They were signed 'Montmorency Minks'; and bore evidence of occasional pencil corrections on the margin with a view to publication later in a volume. And sometimes there were little lyrical fragments too, in a wild, original metre, influenced by Shelley and yet entirely his own. These had special pages to themselves at the end of the big book. But usually he preferred the sonnet form; it was more sober, more dignified. And just now the bumping of the Tube train shaped his emotion into something that began with

Success that poisons many a baser mind With thoughts of self, may lift

but stopped there because, when he changed into another train, the jerkier movement altered the rhythm into something more lyrical, and he got somewhat confused between the two and ended by losing both.

He walked up the hill towards his tiny villa, hugging his secret and anticipating with endless detail how he would break it to his wife. He felt very proud and very happy. The half-mile trudge seemed like a few yards.

He was a slim, rather insignificant figure of a man, neatly dressed, the City clerk stamped plainly over all his person. He envied his employer's burly six-foot stature, but comforted himself always with the thought that he possessed in its place a certain delicacy that was more becoming to a man of letters whom an adverse fate prevented from being a regular minor poet. There was that touch of melancholy in his fastidious appearance that suggested the atmosphere of frustrated dreams. Only the firmness of his character and judgment decreed against the luxury of longish hair; and he prided himself upon remembering that although a poet at heart, he was outwardly a City clerk and, as a strong man, must permit no foolish compromise.

His face on the whole was pleasing, and rather soft, yet, owing to this warring of opposing inner forces, it was at the same time curiously deceptive. Out of that dreamy, vague expression shot, when least expected, the hard and practical judgment of the City—or vice versa. But the whole was gentle—admirable quality for an audience, since it invited confession and assured a gentle hearing. No harshness lay there. Herbert Minks might have been a fine, successful mother perhaps. The one drawback to the physiognomy was that the mild blue eyes were never quite united in their frank gaze. He squinted pleasantly, though his wife told him it was a fascinating cast rather than an actual squint. The chin, too, ran away a little from the mouth, and the lips were usually parted. There was, at any rate, this air of incompatibility of temperament between the features which, made all claim to good looks out of the question.

That runaway chin, however, was again deceptive. It did, indeed run off, but the want of decision it gave to the countenance seemed contradicted by the prominent forehead and straight eyebrows, heavily marked. Minks knew his mind. If sometimes evasive rather than outspoken, he could on occasion be surprisingly firm. He saw life very clearly. He could certainly claim the good judgment stupid people sometimes have, due perhaps to their inability to see alternatives—just as some men's claim to greatness is born of an audacity due to their total lack of humour.

Minks was one of those rare beings who may be counted on—a quality better than mere brains, being of the heart. And Henry Rogers

understood him and read him like an open book. Preferring the steady devotion to the brilliance a high salary may buy, he had watched him for many years in every sort of circumstance. He had, by degrees, here and there, shown an interest in his life. He had chosen his private secretary well. With Herbert Minks at his side he might accomplish many things his heart was set upon. And while Minks bumped down in his third-class crowded carriage to Sydenham, hunting his evasive sonnet, Henry Rogers glided swiftly in a taxi-cab to his rooms in St. James's Street, hard on the trail of another dream that seemed, equally, to keep just beyond his actual reach.

It would certainly seem that thought can travel across space between minds sympathetically in tune, for just as the secretary put his latch-key into his shiny blue door the idea flashed through him, 'I wonder what Mr. Rogers will do, now that he's got his leisure, with a fortune and—me!' And at the same moment Rogers, in his deep arm-chair before the fire, was saying to himself, 'I'm glad Minks has come to me; he's just the man I want for my big Scheme!' And then—'Pity he's such a lugubrious looking fellow, and wears those dreadful fancy waistcoats. But he's very open to suggestion. We can change all that. I must look after Minks a bit. He's rather sacrificed his career for me, I fancy. He's got high aims. Poor little Minks!'

'I'll stand by him whatever happens,' was the thought the slamming of the blue door interrupted. 'To be secretary to such a man is already success.' And again he hugged his secret and himself.

As already said, the new-fledged secretary was married and wrote poetry on the sly. He had four children. He would make an ideal helpmate, worshipping his employer with that rare quality of being interested in his ideas and aims beyond the mere earning of a salary; seeing, too, in that employer more than he, the latter, supposed. For, while he wrote verses on the sly, 'my chief,' as he now preferred to call him, lived poetry in his life.

'He's got it, you know, my dear,' he announced to his wife, as he kissed her and arranged his tie in the gilt mirror over the plush mantelpiece in the 'parlour'; 'he's got the divine thing in him right enough; got it, too, as strong as hunger or any other natural instinct. It's almost functional with him, if I may say so'—which meant 'if you can understand me'—'only, he's deliberately smothered it all these years. He thinks it wouldn't go down with other business men. And he's been in business, you see, from the word go. He meant to make money, and he couldn't do both exactly. Just like myself—'

Minks wandered on. His wife noticed the new enthusiasm in his manner, and was puzzled by it. Something was up, she divined.

'Do you think he'll raise your salary again soon?' she asked practically, helping him draw off the paper cuffs that protected his shirt from ink stains, and throwing them in the fire. 'That seems to be the real point.'

But Herbert evaded the immediate issue. It was so delightful to watch her and keep his secret a little longer.

'And you do deserve success, dear,' she added; 'you've been as faithful as a horse.' She came closer, and stroked his thick, light hair a moment.

He turned quickly. Had he betrayed himself already? Had she read it from his eyes or manner?

'That's nothing,' he answered lightly. 'Duty is duty.'

'Of course, dear,' and she brought him his slippers. He would not let her put them on for him. It was not gallant to permit menial services to a woman.

'Success,' he murmured, 'that poisons many a baser mind—' and then stopped short. 'I've got a new sonnet,' he told her quickly, determined to prolong his pleasure, 'got it in the train coming home. Wait a moment, and I'll give you the rest. It's a beauty, with real passion in it, only I want to keep it cold and splendid if I can. Don't interrupt a moment.' He put the slippers on the wrong feet and stared hard into the fire.

Then Mrs. Minks knew for a certainty that something had happened. He had not even asked after the children.

'Herbert,' she said, with a growing excitement, 'why are you so full of poetry to-night? And what's this about success and poison all of a sudden?' She knew he never drank. 'I believe Mr. Rogers has raised your salary, or done one of those fine things you always say he's going to do. Tell me, dear, please tell me.' There were new, unpaid bills in her pocket, and she almost felt tempted to show them. She poked the fire fussily.

'Albinia,' he answered importantly, with an expression that brought the chin up closer to the lips, and made the eyebrows almost stern, 'Mr. Rogers will do the right thing always—when the right time comes. As a matter of fact'—here he reverted to the former train of thought—'both he and I are misfits in a practical, sordid age. We should have been born in Greece—'

'I simply love your poems, Herbert,' she interrupted gently, wondering how she managed to conceal her growing impatience so well, 'but there's not the money in them that there ought to be, and they don't pay for coals or for Ronald's flannels—'

'Albinia,' he put in softly, 'they relieve the heart, and so make me a happier and a better man. But—I should say he would,' he added, answering her distant question about the salary.

The secret was almost out. It hung on the edge of his lips. A moment longer he hugged it deliciously. He loved these little conversations with his wife. Never a shade of asperity entered into them. And this one in particular afforded him a peculiar delight.

'Both of us are made for higher things than mere money-making,' he went on, lighting his calabash pipe and puffing the smoke carefully

above her head from one corner of his mouth, 'and that's what first attracted us to each other, as I have often mentioned to you. But now'—his bursting heart breaking through all control—that he has sold his interests to a company and retired into private life—er—my own existence should be easier and less exacting. I shall have less routine, be more my own master, and also, I trust, find time perhaps for—'

'Then something *has* happened!' cried Mrs. Minks, springing to her feet.

'It has, my dear,' he answered with forced calmness, though his voice was near the trembling point.

She stood in front of him, waiting. But he himself did not rise, nor show more feeling than he could help. His poems were full of scenes like this in which the men—strong, silent fellows—were fine and quiet. Yet his instinct was to act quite otherwise. One eye certainly betrayed it.

'It has,' he repeated, full of delicious emotion.

'Oh, but Herbert—!'

'And I am no longer that impersonal factor in City life, mere secretary to the Board of a company—'

'Oh, Bertie, dear!'

'But private secretary to Mr. Henry Rogers—private and confidential secretary at—'

'Bert, darling—!'

'At 300 pounds a year, paid quarterly, with expenses extra, and long, regular holidays,' he concluded with admirable dignity and self-possession.

There was a moment's silence.

'You splendour!' She gave a little gasp of admiration that went straight to his heart, and set big fires alight there. 'Your reward has come at last! My hero!'

This was as it should be. The beginning of an epic poem flashed with tumult through his blood. Yet outwardly he kept his admirable calm.

'My dear, we must take success, like disaster, quietly.' He said it gently, as when he played with the children. It was mostly put on, of course, this false grandiloquence of the prig. His eyes already twinkled more than he could quite disguise.

'Then we can manage the other school, perhaps, for Frank?' she cried, and was about to open various flood-gates when he stopped her with a look of proud happiness that broke down all barriers of further pretended secrecy.

'Mr. Rogers,' was the low reply, 'has offered to do that for us—as a start.' The words were leisurely spoken between great puffs of smoke. 'That's what I meant just now by saying that he lived poetry in his life, you see. Another time you will allow judgment to wait on knowledge—'

'You dear old humbug,' she cried, cutting short the sentence that neither of them quite understood, 'I believe you've known this for weeks

—'

'Two hours ago exactly,' he corrected her, and would willingly have prolonged the scene indefinitely had not his practical better half prevented him. For she came over, dropped upon her knees beside his chair, and, putting both arms about his neck, she kissed his foolish sentences away with all the pride and tenderness that filled her to the brim. And it pleased Minks hugely. It made him feel, for the moment at any rate, that he was the hero, not Mr. Henry Rogers.

But he did not show his emotion much. He did not even take his pipe out. It slipped down sideways into another corner of his wandering lips. And, while he returned the kiss with equal tenderness and pleasure, one mild blue eye looked down upon her soft brown hair, and the other glanced sideways, without a trace of meaning in it, at the oleograph of Napoleon on Elba that hung upon the wall... .

Soon afterwards the little Sydenham villa was barred and shuttered, the four children were sound asleep, Herbert and Albinia Minks both lost in the world of happy dreams that sometimes visit honest, simple folk whose consciences are clean and whose aims in life are commonplace but worthy.

Chapter 2

2 When the creation was new and all the stars shone in their first splendour, the gods held their assembly in the sky and sang 'Oh, the picture of perfection! the joy unalloyed!'

But one cried of a sudden—'It seems that somewhere there is a break in the chain of light and one of the stars has been lost.' The golden string of their harp snapped, their song stopped, and they cried in dismay—'Yes, that lost star was the best, she was the glory of all heavens!'

From that day the search is unceasing for her, and the cry goes on from one to the other that in her the world has lost its one joy!

Only in the deepest silence of night the stars smile and whisper among themselves—'Vain is this seeking! Unbroken perfection is over all!'

RABINDRANATH TAGORE. (Prose translation by Author from his original Bengali.)

It was April 30th and Henry Rogers sat in his rooms after breakfast, listening to the rumble of the traffic down St. James's Street, and found the morning dull. A pile of letters lay unopened upon the table, waiting the arrival of the discriminating Mr. Minks with his shorthand note-book and his mild blue eyes. It was half-past nine, and the secretary was due at ten o'clock.

He smiled as he thought of this excellent fellow's first morning in the promoted capacity of private secretary. He would come in very softly, one eye looking more intelligent than the other; the air of the City clerk discarded, and in its place the bearing that belonged to new robes of office worn for the first time. He would bow, say 'Good morning, Mr. Rogers,' glance round with one eye on his employer and another on a possible chair, seat himself with a sigh that meant 'I have written a new poem in the night, and would love to read it to you if I dared,' then flatten out his oblong note-book and look up, expectant and receptive. Rogers would say 'Good morning, Mr. Minks. We've got a busy day before us. Now, let me see—' and would meet his glance with welcome. He would look quickly from one eye to the other— to this day he did not know which one was right to meet—and would wonder for the thousandth time how such an insignificant face could go with such an honest, capable mind. Then he smiled again as he remembered Frank, the little boy whose schooling he was paying for, and realised that Minks would bring a message of gratitude from Mrs. Minks, perhaps would hand him, with a gesture combining dignity and humbleness, a little note of thanks in a long narrow envelope of pale mauve, bearing a flourishing monogram on its back.

And Rogers scowled a little as he thought of the air of gruffness he would assume while accepting it, saying as pleasantly as he could manage, 'Oh, Mr. Minks, that's nothing at all; I'm only too delighted to be of service to the lad.' For he abhorred the expression of emotion, and his delicate sense of tact would make pretence of helping the boy himself, rather than the struggling parents.

Au fond he had a genuine admiration for Minks, and there was something lofty in the queer personality that he both envied and respected. It made him rely upon his judgment in certain ways he could not quite define. Minks seemed devoid of personal ambition in a sense that was not weakness. He was not insensible to the importance of money, nor neglectful of chances that enabled him to do well by his wife and family, but—he was after other things as well, if not chiefly. With a childlike sense of honesty he had once refused a position in a company that was not all it should have been, and the high pay thus rejected pointed to a scrupulous nicety of view that the City, of course, deemed foolishness. And Rogers, aware of this, had taken to him, seeking as it were to make this loss good to him in legitimate ways. Also the fellow belonged to leagues and armies and 'things,' quixotic some of them, that tried to lift humanity. That is, he gave of his spare time, as also of his spare money, to help. His Saturday evenings, sometimes a whole bank holiday, he devoted to the welfare of others, even though the devotion Rogers thought misdirected.

For Minks hung upon the fringe of that very modern, new-fashioned, but almost freakish army that worships old, old ideals, yet insists upon new-fangled names for them. Christ, doubtless, was his model, but it must be a Christ properly and freshly labelled; his Christianity must somewhere include the prefix 'neo,' and the word 'scientific' must also be dragged in if possible before he was satisfied. Minks, indeed, took so long explaining to himself the wonderful title that he was sometimes in danger of forgetting the brilliant truths it so vulgarly concealed. Yet never quite concealed. He must be up-to-date, that was all. His attitude to the world scraped acquaintance with nobility somewhere. His gift was a rare one. Out of so little, he gave his mite, and gave it simply, unaware that he was doing anything unusual.

This attitude of mind had made him valuable, even endeared him, to the successful business man, and in his secret heart Rogers had once or twice felt ashamed of himself. Minks, as it were, knew actual achievement because he was, forcedly, content with little, whereas he, Rogers, dreamed of so much, yet took twenty years to come within reach of what he dreamed. He was always waiting for the right moment to begin.

His reflections were interrupted by the sunlight, which, pouring in a flood across the opposite roof, just then dropped a patch of soft April glory upon the black and yellow check of his carpet slippers. Rogers got

up and, opening the window wider than before, put out his head. The sunshine caught him full in the face. He tasted the fresh morning air. Tinged with the sharp sweetness of the north it had a fragrance as of fields and gardens. Even St. James's Street could not smother its vitality and perfume. He drew it with delight into his lungs, making such a to-do about it that a passer-by looked up to see what was the matter, and noticing the hanging tassel of a flamboyant dressing-gown, at once modestly lowered his eyes again.

But Henry Rogers did not see the passer-by in whose delicate mind a point of taste had thus vanquished curiosity, for his thoughts had flown far across the pale-blue sky, behind the cannon-ball clouds, up into that scented space and distance where summer was already winging her radiant way towards the earth. Visions of June obscured his sight, and something in the morning splendour brought back his youth and boyhood. He saw a new world spread about him—a world of sunlight, butterflies, and flowers, of smooth soft lawns and shaded gravel paths, and of children playing round a pond where rushes whispered in a wind of long ago. He saw hayfields, orchards, tea-things spread upon a bank of flowers underneath a hedge, and a collie dog leaping and tumbling shoulder high among the standing grass... . It was all curiously vivid, and with a sense of something about it unfading and delightfully eternal. It could never pass, for instance, whereas... .

'Ain't yer forgotten the nightcap?' sang out a shrill voice from below, as a boy with a basket on his arm went down the street. He drew back from the window, realising that he was a sight for all admirers. Tossing the end of his cigarette in the direction of the cheeky urchin, he settled himself again in the arm-chair before the glowing grate-fire.

But the fresh world he had tasted came back with him. For Henry Rogers stood this fine spring morning upon the edge of a new life. A long chapter had just closed behind him. He was on the threshold of another. The time to begin had come. And the thrill of his freedom now at hand was very stimulating to his imagination. He was forty, and a rich man. Twenty years of incessant and intelligent labour had brought him worldly success. He admitted he had been lucky, where so many toil on and on till the gates of death stand up and block their way, fortunate if they have earned a competency through years where hope and disappointment wage their incessant weary battle. But he, for some reason known only to the silent Fates, had crested the difficult hill and now stood firm upon the top to see the sunrise, the dreadful gates not even yet in sight. At yesterday's Board meeting, Minks had handed him the papers for his signature; the patents had been transferred to the new company; the cheque had been paid over; and he was now a gentleman of leisure with a handsome fortune lying in his bank to await investment. He was a director in the parent, as well as the subsidiary

companies, with fees that in themselves alone were more than sufficient for his simple needs.

For all his tastes *were* simple, and he had no expensive hobbies or desires; he preferred two rooms and a bath to any house that he had ever seen; pictures he liked best in galleries; horses he could hire without the trouble of owning; the few books worth reading would go into a couple of shelves; motors afflicted, even confused him—he was old-fashioned enough to love country and walk through it slowly on two vigorous legs; marriage had been put aside with a searing disappointment years ago, not forgotten, but accepted; and of travel he had enjoyed enough to realise now that its pleasures could be found reasonably near home and for very moderate expenditure indeed. And the very idea of servants was to him an affliction; he loathed their prying closeness to his intimate life and habits, destroying the privacy he loved. Confirmed old bachelor his friends might call him if they chose; he knew what he wanted. Now at last he had it. The ambition of his life was within reach.

For, from boyhood up, a single big ambition had ever thundered through his being—the desire to be of use to others. To help his fellow-kind was to be his profession and career. It had burned and glowed in him ever since he could remember, and what first revealed it in him was the sight—common enough, alas—of a boy with one leg hobbling along on crutches down the village street. Some deep power in his youthful heart, akin to the wondrous sympathy of women, had been touched. Like a shock of fire it came home to him. He, too, might lose his dearest possession thus, and be unable to climb trees, jump ditches, risk his neck along the edge of the haystack or the roof. *'That might happen to me too!'* was the terrible thing he realised, and had burst into tears... .

Crutches at twelve! And the family hungry, as he later learned! Something in the world was wrong; he thought every one had enough to eat, at least, and only the old used crutches. 'The Poor was a sort of composite wretch, half criminal, who deserved to be dirty, suffering, punished; but this boy belonged to a family that worked and did its best. Something in the world-machinery had surely broken loose and caused violent disorder. For no one cared particularly. The "thorities," he heard, looked after the Poor—"thorities in law," as he used to call the mysterious Person he never actually saw, stern, but kindly in a grave impersonal way; and asked once if some relation- in-law or other, who was mentioned often but never seen, had, therefore, anything to do with the poor.

Dropping into his heart from who knows what far, happy star, this passion had grown instead of faded: to give himself for others, to help afflicted folk, to make the world go round a little more easily. And he had never forgotten the deep thrill with which he heard his father tell him of some wealthy man who during his lifetime had given away a

million pounds—anonymously... . His own pocket-money just then was five shillings a week, and his expectations just exactly—nothing.

But before his dreams could know accomplishment, he must have means. To be of use to anybody at all he must make himself effective. The process must be reversed, for no man could fight without weapons, and weapons were only to be had as the result of steady, concentrated effort—selfish effort. A man must fashion himself before he can be effective for others. Self-effacement, he learned, was rather a futile virtue after all.

As the years passed he saw his chances. He cut short a promising University career and entered business. His talents lay that way, as his friends declared, and unquestionably he had a certain genius for invention; for, while scores of futile processes he first discovered remained mere clever solutions of interesting problems, he at length devised improvements in the greater industries, and, patenting them wisely, made his way to practical results.

But the process had been a dangerous one, and during the long business experience the iron had entered his soul, and he had witnessed at close quarters the degrading influence of the lust of acquisition. The self-advertising humbug of most philanthropy had clouded something in him that he felt could never again grow clear and limpid as before, and a portion of his original zest had faded. For the City hardly encouraged it. One bit of guilt after another had been knocked off his brilliant dream, one jet of flame upon another quenched. The single eye that fills the body full of light was a thing so rare that its possession woke suspicion. Even of money generously given, so little reached its object; gaping pockets and grasping fingers everywhere lined the way of safe delivery. It sickened him. So few, moreover, were willing to give without acknowledgment in at least one morning paper. 'Bring back the receipt' was the first maxim even of the office-boys; and between the right hand and the left of every one were special 'private wires' that flashed the news as quickly as possible about the entire world.

Yet, while inevitable disillusion had dulled his youthful dreams, its glory was never quite destroyed. It still glowed within. At times, indeed, it ran into flame, and knew something of its original splendour. Women, in particular, had helped to keep it alive, fanning its embers bravely. For many women, he found, dreamed his own dream, and dreamed it far more sweetly. They were closer to essential realities than men were. While men bothered with fuss and fury about empires, tariffs, street-cars, and marvellous engines for destroying one another, women, keeping close to the sources of life, knew, like children, more of its sweet, mysterious secrets—the things of value no one yet has ever put completely into words. He wondered, a little sadly, to see them battling now to scuffle with the men in managing the gross machinery, cleaning the pens and regulating ink-pots. Did they really think that by helping

to decide whether rates should rise or fall, or how many buttons a factory-inspector should wear upon his uniform, they more nobly helped the world go round? Did they never pause to reflect who would fill the places they thus vacated? With something like melancholy he saw them stepping down from their thrones of high authority, for it seemed to him a prostitution of their sweet prerogatives that damaged the entire sex.

'Old-fashioned bachelor, no doubt, I am,' he smiled quietly to himself, coming back to the first reflection whence his thoughts had travelled so far—the reflection, namely, that now at last he possessed the freedom he had longed and toiled for.

And then he paused and looked about him, confronted with a difficulty. To him it seemed unusual, but really it was very common.

For, having it, he knew not at first what use to make of it. This dawned upon him suddenly when the sunlight splashed his tawdry slippers with its gold. The movement to the open window was really instinctive beginning of a search, as though in the free, wonderful spaces out of doors he would find the thing he sought to do. Now, settled back in the deep arm-chair, he realised that he had not found it. The memories of childhood had flashed into him instead. He renewed the search before the dying fire, waiting for the sound of Minks' ascending footsteps on the stairs... .

And this revival of the childhood mood was curious, he felt, almost significant, for it was symbolical of so much that he had deliberately, yet with difficulty, suppressed and put aside. During these years of concentrated toil for money, his strong will had neglected of set purpose the call of a robust imagination. He had stifled poetry just as he had stifled play. Yet really that imagination had merely gone into other channels—scientific invention. It was a higher form, married at least with action that produced poetry in steel and stone instead of in verse. Invention has ever imagination and poetry at its heart.

The acquirement of wealth demanded his entire strength, and all lighter considerations he had consistently refused to recognise, until he thought them dead. This sudden flaming mood rushed up and showed him otherwise. He reflected on it, but clumsily, as with a mind too long trained in the rigid values of stocks and shares, buying and selling, hard figures that knew not elasticity. This softer subject led him to no conclusion, leaving him stranded among misty woods and fields of flowers that had no outlet. He realised, however, clearly that this side of him was not atrophied as he thought. Its unused powers had merely been accumulating—underground.

He got no further than that just now. He poked the fire and lit another cigarette. Then, glancing idly at the paper, his eye fell upon the list of births, and by merest chance picked out the name of Crayfield. Some nonentity had been 'safely delivered of a son' at Crayfield, the village

where he had passed his youth and childhood. He saw the Manor House where he was born, the bars across the night-nursery windows, the cedars on the lawn, the haystacks just beyond the stables, and the fields where the rabbits sometimes fell asleep as they sat after enormous meals too stuffed to move. He saw the old gravel-pit that led, the gardener told him, to the centre of the earth. A whiff of perfume from the laurustinus in the drive came back, the scent of hay, and with it the sound of the mowing-machine going over the lawn. He saw the pony in loose flat leather shoes. The bees were humming in the lime trees. The rooks were cawing. A blackbird whistled from the shrubberies where he once passed an entire day in hiding, after emptying an ink-bottle down the German governess's dress. He heard the old family butler in his wheezy voice calling in vain for 'Mr. 'Enery' to come in. The tone was respectful, seductive as the man could make it, yet reproachful. He remembered throwing a little stone that caught him just where the Newgate fringe met the black collar of his coat, so that his cry of delight betrayed his hiding-place. The whacking that followed he remembered too, and how his brother emerged suddenly from behind the curtain with, 'Father, may I have it instead of Henry, please?' That spontaneous offer of sacrifice, of willingness to suffer for another, had remained in his mind for a long time as a fiery, incomprehensible picture.

More dimly, then, somewhere in mist behind, he saw other figures moving—the Dustman and the Lamplighter, the Demon Chimneysweep in black, the Woman of the Haystack—outposts and sentries of a larger fascinating host that gathered waiting in the shadows just beyond. The creations of his boy's imagination swarmed up from their temporary graves, and made him smile and wonder. After twenty years of strenuous business life, how pale and thin they seemed. Yet at the same time how extraordinarily alive and active! He saw, too, the huge Net of Stars he once had made to catch them with from that night-nursery window, fastened by long golden nails made out of meteors to the tops of the cedars... . There had been, too, a train—the Starlight Express. It almost seemed as if *they* knew, too, that a new chapter had begun, and that they called him to come back and play again... .

Then, with a violent jump, his thoughts flew to other things, and he considered one by one the various philanthropic schemes he had cherished against the day when he could realise them. That day had come. But the schemes seemed one and all wild now, impracticable, already accomplished by others better than he could hope to accomplish them, and none of them fulfilling the first essential his practical mind demanded—knowing his money spent precisely as he wished. Dreams, long cherished, seemed to collapse one by one before him just when he at last came up with them. He thought of the woman who was to have helped him, now married to another who had money without working

for it. He put the thought back firmly in its place. He knew now a greater love than that—the love for many... .

He was embarking upon other novel schemes when there was a ring at the bell, and the charwoman, who passed with him for servant, ushered in his private secretary, Mr. Minks. Quickly readjusting the machinery of his mind, Rogers came back to the present,

'Good morning, Mr. Rogers. I trust I am punctual.'

'Good morning, Minks; yes, on the stroke of ten. We've got a busy day. Let's see now. How are you, by the by?' he added, as an afterthought, catching first one eye, then the other, and looking finally between the two.

'Very well, indeed, thank you, Mr. Rogers.' He was dressed in a black tail-coat, with a green tie neatly knotted into a spotless turn-down collar. He glanced round him for a chair, one hand already in his pocket for the note-book.

'Good,' said Rogers, indicating where he might seat himself, and reaching for the heap of letters.

The other sighed a little and began to look expectant and receptive.

'If I might give you this first, please, Mr. Rogers,' he said, suddenly pretending to remember something in his breast-pocket and handing across the table, with a slight flush upon his cheeks, a long, narrow, mauve envelope with a flourishing address. 'It was a red-letter day for Mrs. Minks when I told her of your kindness. She wished to thank you in person, but—I thought a note—I knew,' he stammered, 'you would prefer a letter. It is a tremendous help to both of us, if I may say so again.'

'Yes, yes, quite so,' said Rogers, quickly; 'and I'm glad to be of service to the lad. You must let me know from time to time how he's getting on.'

Minks subsided, flattening out his oblong notebook and examining the points of his pencil sharpened at both ends as though the fate of Empires depended on it. They attacked the pile of correspondence heartily, while the sun, watching them through the open window, danced gorgeously upon the walls and secretly put the fire out.

In this way several hours passed, for besides letters to be dictated, there were careful instructions to be given about many things. Minks was kept very busy. He was now not merely shorthand clerk, and he had to be initiated into the inner history of various enterprises in which his chief was interested. All Mr. Rogers's London interests, indeed, were to be in his charge, and, obviously aware of this, he bore himself proudly with an air of importance that had no connection with a common office. To watch him, you would never have dreamed that Herbert Minks had ever contemplated City life, much less known ten years of drudgery in its least poetic stages. For him, too, as for his employer, anew chapter of existence had begun—'commenced' he would have phrased it—and, as confidential adviser to a man of fortune whose character he admired

almost to the point of worship, he was now a person whose importance it was right the world should recognise. And he meant the world to take this attitude without delay. He dressed accordingly, knowing that of every ten people nine judge value from clothes, and hat, and boots—especially boots. His patent leather, buttoned boots were dazzling, with upper parts of soft grey leather. And his shiny 'topper' wore a band of black. Minks, so far as he knew, was not actually in mourning, but somebody for whom he ought to be in mourning might die any day, and meanwhile, he felt, the band conveyed distinction. It suited a man of letters. It also protected the hat.

'Thank'ee,' said his chief as luncheon time drew near; 'and now, if you'll get those letters typed, you might leave 'em here for me on your way home to sign. That's all we have to-day, isn't it?'

'You wanted, I think, to draft your Scheme for Disabled—' began the secretary, when the other cut him short.

'Yes, yes, but that must wait. I haven't got it clear yet in my own mind. You might think it out a bit yourself, perhaps, meanwhile, and give me your ideas, eh? Look up what others have done in the same line, for instance, and tell me where they failed. What the weakness of their schemes was, you know—and—er—so forth.'

A faint smile, that held the merest ghost of merriment, passed across the face of Minks, leaping, unobserved by his chief, from one eye to the other. There was pity and admiration in it; a hint of pathos visited those wayward lips. For the suggestion revealed the weakness the secretary had long ago divined—that the practical root of the matter did not really lie in him at all, and Henry Rogers forever dreamed of 'Schemes' he was utterly unable and unsuited to carry out. Improvements in a silk machine was one thing, but improvements in humanity was another. Like the poetry in his soul they could never know fulfilment. He had inspiration, but no constructive talent. For the thousandth time Minks wondered, glancing at his employer's face, how such calm and gentle features, such dreamy eyes and a Vandyke beard so neatly trimmed, could go with ambitions so lofty and so unusual. This sentence he had heard before, and was destined often to hear again, while achievement came no nearer.

'I will do so at the first opportunity.' He put the oblong note-book carefully in his pocket, and stood by the table in an attitude of 'any further instructions, please?' while one eye wandered to the unopened letter that was signed 'Albinia Minks, with heartfelt gratitude.'

'And, by the by, Minks,' said his master, turning as though a new idea had suddenly struck him and he had formed a hasty plan, 'you might kindly look up an afternoon train to Crayfield. Loop line from Charing Cross, you know. Somewhere about two o'clock or so. I have to—er—I think I'll run down that way after luncheon.'

Whereupon, having done this last commission, and written it down upon a sheet of paper which he placed with care against the clock, beside the unopened letter, the session closed, and Minks, in his mourning hat and lavender gloves, walked up St. James's Street apparently *en route* for the Ritz, but suddenly, as with careless unconsciousness, turning into an A.B.C. Depot for luncheon, well pleased with himself and with the world, but especially with his considerate employer.

Ten minutes later Mr. Rogers followed him on his way to the club, and just when Minks was reflecting with pride of the well-turned phrases he had dictated to his wife for her letter of thanks, it passed across the mind of its recipient that he had forgotten to read it altogether. And, truth to tell, he never yet has read it; for, returning late that evening from his sentimental journey down to Crayfield, it stood no longer where he had left it beside the clock, and nothing occurred to remind him of its existence. Apart from its joint composers, no one can ever know its contents but the charwoman, who, noticing the feminine writing, took it back to Lambeth and pored over it with a candle for full half an hour, greatly disappointed. 'Things like that,' she grumbled to her husband, whose appearance suggested that he went for bigger game, 'ain't worth the trouble of taking at all, whichever way you looks at it.' And probably she was right.

Chapter 3

3 And what if All of animated nature Be but as Instruments diversely framed That tremble into thought, as o'er them sweeps One infinite and intellectual Breeze, At once the Soul of each, and God of all? *The AEolian Harp*, S. T. COLERIDGE.

In the train, even before St. John's was passed, a touch of inevitable reaction had set in, and Rogers asked himself why he was going. For a sentimental journey was hardly in his line, it seemed. But no satisfactory answer was forthcoming—none, at least, that a Board or a Shareholders' Meeting would have considered satisfactory.

There was an answer in him somewhere, but he couldn't quite get down to it. The spring glory had enticed him back to childhood. The journey was symbolical of escape. That was the truth. But the part of him that knew it had lain so long in abeyance that only a whisper flitted across his mind as he sat looking out of the carriage window at the fields round Lee and Eltham. The landscape seemed hauntingly familiar, but what surprised him was the number of known faces that rose and smiled at him. A kind of dream confusion blurred his outer sight;

At Bexley, as he hurried past, he caught dimly a glimpse of an old nurse whom he remembered trying to break into bits with a hop-pole he could barely lift; and, most singular thing, on the Sidcup platform, a group of noisy schoolboys, with smudged faces and ridiculously small caps stuck on the back of their heads, had scrambled viciously to get into his compartment. They carried brown canvas satchels full of crumpled books and papers, and though the names had mostly escaped him, he remembered every single face. There was Barlow—big, bony chap who stammered, bringing his words out with a kind of whistling sneeze. Barlow had given him his first thrashing for copying his stammer. There was young Watson, who funk'd at football and sneaked to a master about a midnight supper. He stole pocket-money, too, and was expelled. Then he caught a glimpse of another fellow with sly face and laughing eyes; the name had vanished, but he was the boy who put jalap in the music-master's coffee, and received a penny from five or six others who thus escaped a lesson. All waved their hands to him as the train hurried away, and the last thing he saw was the station lamp where he had lit the cigar that made three of them, himself included, deadly sick. Familiar woods and a little blue-eyed stream then hid the vision ... and a moment later he was standing on the platform of his childhood's station, giving up his first-class ticket (secretly ashamed that it was not third) to a station-master-ticket-collector person who simply was not real at all.

For he had no beard. He was small, too, and insignificant. The way he had dwindled, with the enormous station that used to be a mile or so in length, was severely disappointing. That STATION-MASTER with the beard ought to have lived for ever. His niche in the Temple of Fame was sure. One evening he had called in full uniform at the house and asked to see Master Henry Rogers, the boy who had got out 'WHILE-THE-TRAIN-WAS-STILL-IN-MOTION,' and had lectured him gravely with a face like death. Never again had he left a train 'whilestillinmotion,' though it was years before he discovered how his father had engineered that awful, salutary visit.

He asked casually, in a voice that hardly seemed his own, about the service back to town, and received the answer with a kind of wonder. It was so respectful. The porters had not found him out yet; but the moment they did so, he would have to run. He did not run, however. He walked slowly down the Station Road, swinging the silver-knobbed cane the office clerks had given him when he left the City. Leisurely, without a touch of fear, he passed the Water Works, where the huge iron crank of the shaft rose and fell with ominous thunder against the sky. It had once been part of that awful hidden Engine which moved the world. To go near it was instant death, and he always crossed the road to avoid it; but this afternoon he went down the cinder pathway so close that he could touch it with his stick. It was incredible that so terrible a thing could dwindle in a few years to the dimensions of a motor piston. The crank that moved up and down like a bending, gigantic knee looked almost flimsy now... .

Then the village street came into view and he suddenly smelt the fields and gardens that topped the hill beyond. The world turned gold and amber, shining beneath a turquoise sky. There was a rush of flaming sunsets, one upon another, followed by great green moons, and hosts of stars that came twinkling across barred windows to his very bedside ... that grand old Net of Stars he made so cunningly. Cornhill and Lombard Street flashed back upon him for a second, then dived away and hid their faces for ever, as he passed the low grey wall beside the church where first he had seen the lame boy hobbling, and had realised that the whole world suffered.

A moment he stood here, thinking. He heard the wind sighing in the yew trees beside the dark brown porch. Rooks were cawing among the elms across the churchyard, and pigeons wheeled and fluttered about the grey square tower. The wind, the tower, the weather-stained old porch —these had not changed. This sunshine and this turquoise sky were still the same.

The village stopped at the churchyard—significant boundary. No single building ventured farther; the houses ran the other way instead, pouring down the steep hill in a cataract of bricks and roofs towards the station. The hill, once topped, and the churchyard left behind, he

entered the world of fields and little copses. It was just like going through a gateway. It was a Gateway. The road sloped gently down for half-a-mile towards the pair of big iron gates that barred the drive up to the square grey house upon whose lawns he once had chased butterflies, but from whose upper windows he once had netted—stars.

The spell came over him very strongly then as he went slowly down that road. The altered scale of distance confused him; the road had telescoped absurdly; the hayfields were so small. At the turn lay the pond with yellow duckweed and a bent iron railing that divided it to keep the cows from crossing. Formerly, of course, that railing had been put to prevent children drowning in its bottomless depths; all ponds had been bottomless then, and the weeds had spread to entice the children to a watery death. But now he could have jumped across it, weed and railing too, without a run, and he looked in vain for the shores that once had been so seductively far away. They were mere dirty, muddy edges.

This general shrinkage in space was very curious. But a similar contraction, he realised, had taken place in time as well, for, looking back upon his forty years, they seemed such a little thing compared to the enormous stretch they offered when he had stood beside this very pond and looked ahead. He wondered vaguely which was the reality and which the dream. But his effort was not particularly successful, and he came to no conclusion. Those years of strenuous business life were like a few weeks, yet their golden results were in his pockets. Those years of childhood had condensed into a jumble of sunny hours, yet their golden harvest was equally in his heart. Time and space were mere bits of elastic that could stretch or shrink as thought directed, feeling chose. And now both thought and feeling chose emphatically. He stepped back swiftly. His mind seemed filled with stars and butterflies and childhood's figures of wonder. Childhood took him prisoner.

It was curious at first, though, how the acquired nature made a struggle to assert itself, and the practical side of him, developed in the busy markets of the world, protested. It was automatic rather, and at best not very persistent; it soon died away. But, seeing the gravel everywhere, he wondered if there might not be valuable clay about, what labour cost, and what the nearest stations were for haulage; and, seeing the hop-poles, he caught himself speculating what wood they were made of, and what varnish would best prevent their buried points from going rotten in this particular soil. There was a surge of practical considerations, but quickly fading. The last one was stirred by the dust of a leisurely butcher's cart. He had visions of a paste for motor-roads, or something to lay dust ... but, before the dust had settled again through the sunshine about his feet, or the rumble of the cart died away into distance, the thought vanished like a nightmare in the dawn. It ran away over the switchback of the years, uphill to Midsummer, downhill to Christmas, jumping a ditch at Easter, and a hedge at that terrible

thing known as 'Clipse of the Moon.' The leaves of the elm trees whispered overhead. He was moving through an avenue that led towards big iron gates beside a little porter's lodge. He saw the hollies, and smelt the laurustinus. There lay the triangle of uncut grass at the cross-roads, the long, grey, wooden palings built upon moss-grown bricks; and against the sky he just caught a glimpse of the feathery, velvet cedar crests, crests that once held nails of golden meteors for his Net of Stars.

Determined to enjoy his cake and eat it at the same time as long as possible, he walked down the road a little distance, eyeing the lawns and windows of the house through narrow gaps between the boarding of the fence. He prolonged the pleasures of anticipation thus, and, besides, he wished to see if the place was occupied or empty. It looked unkempt rather, the gardens somewhat neglected, and yet there hung an air of occupancy about it all. He had heard the house had changed hands several times. But it was difficult to see clearly; the sunshine dazzled; the lilac and laburnum scattered sheets of colour through which the shadows wove themselves an obscuring veil, He kept seeing butterflies and chasing them with his sight.

'Can you tell me if this house is occupied?' he asked abruptly of an old gentleman who coughed suddenly behind him.

It was an explanation as well as a question, for the passer-by had surprised him in a remarkable attitude. He was standing on tiptoe upon the parapet of brick, pulling himself up above the fence by his hands, and his hat had fallen into the road.

'The shrubberies are so dense I can't see through them,' he added, landing upon his feet with a jump, a little breathless. He felt rather foolish. He was glad the stranger was not Minks or one of his fellow directors. 'The fact is I lived here as a boy. I'm not a burglar.'

But the old gentleman—a clergyman apparently—stood there smiling without a word as he handed him the fallen hat. He was staring rather intently into his eyes.

'Ahem!' coughed Mr. Rogers, to fill an awkward gap. 'You're very kind, sir,' and he took the hat and brushed the dust off. Something brushed off his sight and memory at the same time.

'Ahem' coughed the other, still staring. 'Please do not mention it—' adding after a second's pause, to the complete amazement of his listener, 'Mr. Rogers.'

And then it dawned upon him. Something in the charming, peace-lit face was strangely familiar.

'I say,' he exclaimed eagerly, 'this is a pleasure,' and then repeated with even greater emphasis, 'but this is a pleasure, indeed. Who ever would have thought it?' he added with delicious ambiguity. He seized the outstretched hand and shook it warmly—the hand of the old vicar who had once been his tutor too.

'You've come back to your boyhood, then. Is that it? And to see the old place and—your old friends?' asked the other with his beautiful, kindly smile that even false quantities had never been able to spoil. 'We've not forgotten you as you've forgotten us, you see,' he added; 'and the place, though empty now for years, has not forgotten you either, I'll be bound.'

They stood there in the sunshine on the dusty road talking of a hundred half-forgotten things, as the haze of memory lifted, and scenes and pictures, names and faces, details of fun and mischief rained upon him like flowers in a sudden wind of spring. The voice and face of his old tutor bridged the years like magic. Time had stood still here in this fair Kentish garden. The little man in black who came every Saturday morning with his dingy bag had forgotten to wind the clocks, perhaps... .

'But you will like to go inside and see it all for yourself—alone,' the Vicar said at length. 'My housekeeper has the keys. I'll send a boy with them to the lodge. It won't take five minutes. And then you must come up to the Vicarage for tea—or dinner if you're kept—and stay the night. My married daughter—you remember Joan and May, of course?—is with us just now; she'll be so very glad to see you. You know the way.'

And he moved off down the country road, still vigorous at seventy, with his black straw hat and big square-toed boots, his shoulders hardly more bent than when his mischievous pupil had called every morning with Vergil and Todhunter underneath one arm, and in his heart a lust to hurry after sleepy rabbits in the field.

'My married daughter—you remember May?'

The blue-eyed girl of his boyhood passion flitted beside his disappearing figure. He remembered the last time he saw her—refusing to help her from a place of danger in the cedar branches—when he put his love into a single eloquent phrase: 'You silly ass!' then cast her adrift for ever because she said 'Thanks awfully,' and gave him a great wet kiss. But he thought a lot of her all the same, and the thoughts had continued until the uproar in the City drowned them.

Thoughts crowded thick and fast.

How vital thinking was after all! Nothing seemed able to kill its eternal pictures. The coincidence of meeting his old tutor again was like a story-book, though in reality likely enough; for his own face was not so greatly altered by the close brown beard perhaps; and the Vicar had grown smaller, that was all. Like everything else, he had shrunk, of course—like road and station-master and water-works. He had almost said, 'You, too, have shrunk'—but otherwise was the same old fluffy personality that no doubt still got sadly muddled in his sermons, gave out wrong hymns, and spent his entire worldly substance on his scattered parish. His voice was softer too. It rang in his ears still, as though there had been no break of over two decades. The hum of bees and scythes was in it just as when it came through the open study window while he construed the *Georgics*... . But, most clearly of all, he heard two sentences—

'You have come back to your boyhood,' and 'The empty place has not forgotten you, I'll be bound.' Both seemed significant. They hummed and murmured through his mind. That old net of starlight somehow caught them in its golden meshes.

Chapter 4

4 A Spirit gripped him by the hair and carried him far away, Till he heard as the roar of a rain-fed ford the roar of the Milky Way: Till he heard the roar of the Milky Way die down and drone and cease.
Tomlinson, R. KIPLING.

The boy presently came up in a cloud of dust with the key, and ran off again with a shilling in his pocket, while Henry Rogers, budding philanthropist and re-awakening dreamer, went down the hill of memories at high speed that a doctor would have said was dangerous, a philosopher morbid, and the City decreed unanimously as waste of time.

He went over the house from cellar to ceiling...

And finally he passed through a back door in the scullery and came out upon the lawn. With a shock he realised that a long time had intervened. The dusk was falling. The rustle of its wings was already in the shrubberies. He had missed the tea hour altogether. And, as he walked there, so softly that he hardly disturbed the thrushes that busily tapped the dewy grass for supper, he knew suddenly that he was not alone, but that shadowy figures hid everywhere, watching, waiting, wondering like himself. They trooped after him, invisible and silent, as he went about the old familiar garden, finding nothing changed. They were so real that once he stopped beneath the lime trees, where afternoon tea was served in summer, and where the Long Walk began its haunted, shadowy existence—stood still a moment and called to them—

'Is any one there? Come out and show yourselves... !'

And though his voice fell dead among the foliage, winning echoes from spots whence no echoes possibly could come, and rushing back upon him like a boomerang, he got the curious impression that it had penetrated into certain corners of the shrubberies where it had been heard and understood. Answers did not come. They were no more audible than the tapping of the thrushes, or the little feet of darkness that ran towards him from the eastern sky. But they were there. The troop of Presences drew closer. They had been creeping on all fours. They now stood up. The entire garden was inhabited and alive.

'He has come back!'

It ran in a muted whisper like a hush of wind. The thrill of it passed across the lawn in the dusk. The dark tunnel of the Long Walk filled suddenly to the brim. The thrushes raised their heads, peeping sideways to listen, on their guard. Then the leaves opened a little and the troop ventured nearer. The doors and windows of the silent, staring house had also opened. From the high nursery windows especially, queer shapes of shadow flitted down to join the others. For the sun was far away behind

the cedars now, and that Net of Starlight dropped downwards through the air. So carefully had he woven it years ago that hardly a mesh was torn... .

'He has come back again... !' the whisper ran a second time, and he looked about him for a place where he could hide.

But there was no place. Escape from the golden net was now impossible... .

Then suddenly, looming against the field that held the Gravel-Pit and the sleeping rabbits, he saw the outline of the Third Class Railway Carriage his father bought as a Christmas present, still standing on the stone supports that were borrowed from a haystack.

That Railway Carriage had filled whole years with joy and wonder. They had called it the Starlight Express. It had four doors, real lamps in the roof, windows that opened and shut, and big round buffers. It started without warning. It went at full speed in a moment. It was never really still. The footboards were endless and very dangerous.

He saw the carriage with its four compartments still standing there in the hay field. It looked mysterious, old, and enormous as ever. There it still stood as in his boyhood days, but stood neglected and unused.

The memory of the thrilling journeys he had made in this Starlight Express completed his recapture, for he knew now who the troop of Presences all about him really were. The passengers, still waiting after twenty years' delay, thinking perhaps the train would never start again, were now impatient. They had caught their engine-driver again at last. Steam was up. Already the blackbirds whistled. And something utterly wild and reckless in him passionately broke its bonds with a flood of longings that no amount of years or 'Cities' could ever subdue again. He stepped out from the dozing lime trees and held his hat up like a flag.

'Take your seats,' he cried as of old, 'for the Starlight Express. Take your seats! No luggage allowed! Animals free! Passengers with special tickets may drive the engine in their turn! First stop the Milky Way for hot refreshments! Take your seats, or stay at home for ever!'

It was the old cry, still remembered accurately; and the response was immediate. The rush of travellers from the Long Walk nearly took him off his feet. From the house came streams of silent figures, families from the shrubberies, tourists from the laurels by the scullery windows, and throngs of breathless oddities from the kitchen-garden. The lawn was littered with discarded luggage; umbrellas dropped on flower-beds, where they instantly took root and grew; animals ran scuttling among them—birds, ponies, dogs, kittens, donkeys, and white mice in trailing swarms. There was not a minute to spare. One big Newfoundland brought several Persian kittens on his back, their tails behind them in the air like signals; a dignified black retriever held a baby in his mouth; and fat children by the score, with unfastened clothes and smudged

faces, many of them in their nightclothes, poured along in hurrying, silent crowds, softer than clouds that hide a crescent moon in summer.

'But this is impossible,' he cried to himself. 'The multiplication tables have gone wrong. The City has driven me mad. No shareholder would stand such a thing for a minute!'

While, at the same time, that other voice in him kept shouting, ever more loudly—

'Take your seats! Take your seats! The Starlight Express is off to Fairyland! Show your tickets! Show your tickets!'

He laughed with happiness.

The throng and rush were at first so great that he recognised hardly any of the passengers; but, the first press over, he saw several bringing up the rear who were as familiar as of yesterday. They nodded kindly to him as they passed, no sign of reproach for the long delay in their friendly eyes. He had left his place beside the lime trees, and now stood at the carriage door, taking careful note of each one as he showed his ticket to the Guard. And the Guard was the blue-eyed girl. She did not clip the tickets, but merely looked at them. She looked, first at the ticket, then into the face of the passenger. The glance of the blue eyes was the passport. Of course, he remembered now—both guard and engine-driver were obliged to have blue eyes. Blue eyes furnished the motor-power and scenery and everything. It was the spell that managed the whole business—the Spell of the Big Blue eyes—blue, the colour of youth and distance, of sky and summer flowers, of childhood.

He watched these last passengers come up one by one, and as they filed past him he exchanged a word with each. How pleased they were to see him! But how ashamed he felt for having been so long away. Not one, however, reminded him of it, and—what touched him most of all—not one suspected he had nearly gone for good. All knew he would come back.

What looked like a rag-and-bone man blundered up first, his face a perfect tangle of beard and hair, and the eyebrows like bits of tow stuck on with sealing-wax. It was The Tramp—Traveller of the World, the Eternal Wanderer, homeless as the wind; his vivid personality had haunted all the lanes of childhood. And, as Rogers nodded kindly to him, the figure waited for something more.

'Ain't forgot the rhyme, 'ave yer?' he asked in a husky voice that seemed to issue from the ground beneath his broken boots. 'The rhyme we used to sing together in the Noight-Nursery when I put my faice agin' the bars, after climbin' along 'arf a mile of slippery slaites to git there.'

And Rogers, smiling, found himself saying it, while the pretty Guard fixed her blue eyes on his face and waited patiently:—

I travel far and wide, But in my own inside! Such places And queer races! I never go to them, you see, *Because they always come to me!*

'Take your seat, please,' cried the Guard. 'No luggage, you know!' She pushed him in sideways, first making him drop his dirty bundle.

With a quick, light step a very thin man hurried up. He had no luggage, but carried on his shoulder a long stick with a point of gold at its tip.

'Light the lamps,' said the Guard impatiently, 'and then sit on the back buffers and hold your pole out to warn the shooting stars.'

He hopped in, though not before Rogers had passed the time of night with him first:—

I stand behind the sky, and light the stars,— Except on cloudy nights;
And then my head Remains in bed, And takes along the ceiling—easier
flights!

Others followed quickly then, too quickly for complete recognition. Besides, the Guard was getting more and more impatient.

'You've clean forgotten *me*,' said one who had an awful air of darkness about him; 'and no wonder, because you never saw me properly. On Sundays, when I was nicely washed up you couldn't 'ardly reckernise me. Nachural 'nuff, too!'

He shot by like a shadow, then pulled up a window with a rattle, popped his dirty head out, and called back thickly as if his mouth was full of smoke or pudding:—

The darkness suits *me* best, For my old face Is out of place, Except in
chimney stacks! Upon my crown The soot comes down Filling my eyes
with blacks. Don't light the fire, Or I'd—.

'Stop it!' cried the Guard, shutting the window with a snap, so that Rogers never knew whether the missing word used to be 'expire' or 'perspire'; 'and go on to your proper place on the tender.' Then she turned quickly to fix her big blue eyes upon the next comer. And how they did come, to be sure! There was the Gypsy, the Creature of the Gravel-Pit, the long-legged, long-armed thing from the Long Walk—she could make her arm stretch the whole length like elastic—the enormous Woman of the Haystack, who lived beneath the huge tarpaulin cover, the owner of the Big Cedar, and the owner of the Little Cedar, all treading fast upon one another's heels.

From the Blue Summer-house came the Laughter. Rogers remembered pretending once that he was going to faint. He had thrown himself upon the summer-house floor and kicked, and the blue-eyed girl, instead of being thrilled as both anticipated, had laughed abominably.

'Painters don't kick!' she had said with scorn, while he had answered, though without conviction, 'Men-fainters do—kick dreadfully.' And she had simply laughed till her sides ached, while he lay there kicking till his muscles were sore, in the vain hope of winning her belief.

He exchanged a glance with her now, as the Laughter slipped in past them. The eyes of the Guard were very soft. He was found out and forgiven at the same time.