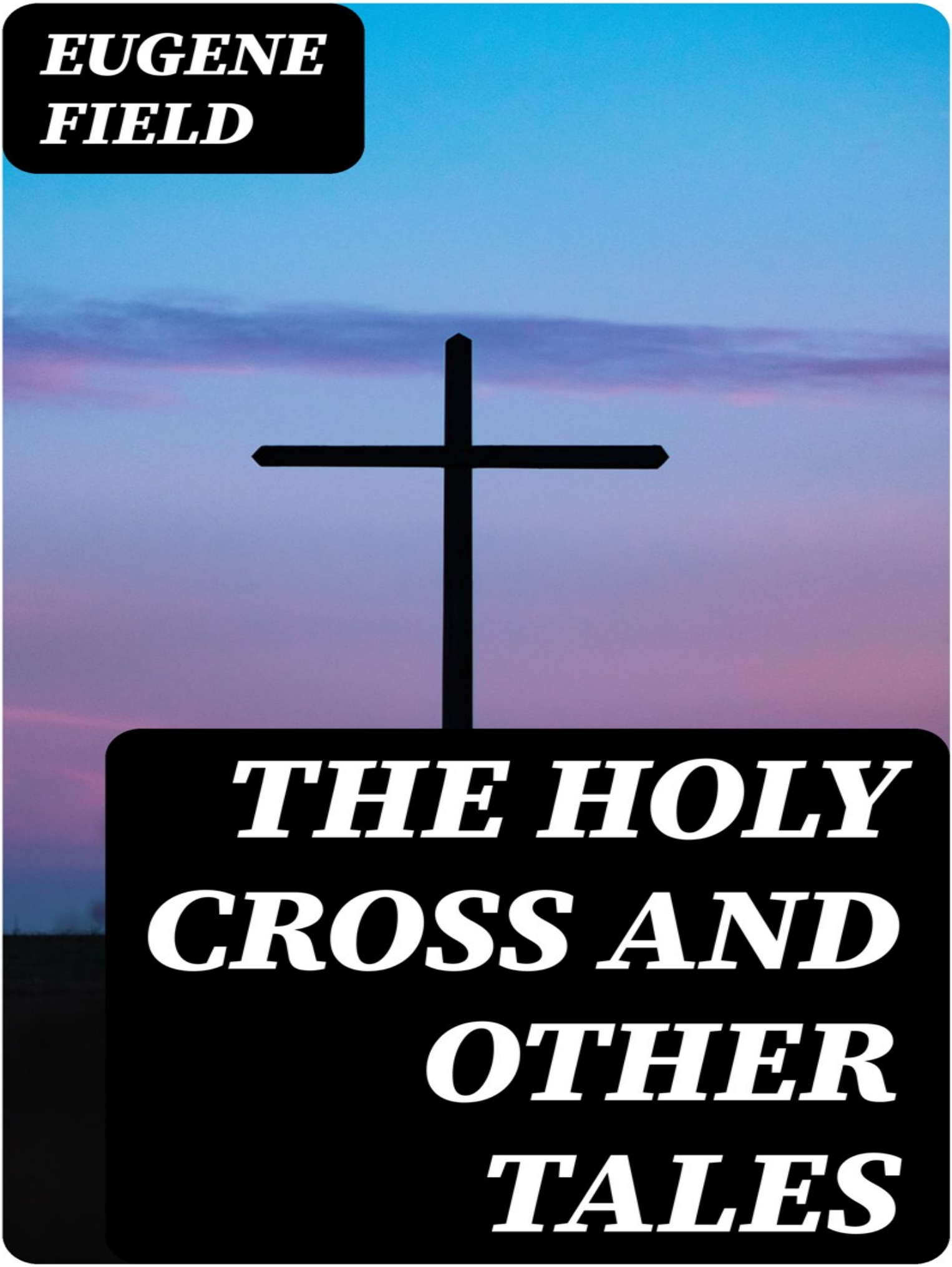
EUGENE FIELD



THE HOLY CROSS AND OTHER TALES

Eugene Field

The Holy Cross and Other Tales

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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INTRODUCTION

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ALAS, POOR YORICK!

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In paying a tribute to the mingled mirth and tenderness of Eugene Field—the poet of whose going the West may say, "He took our daylight with him"—one of his fellow journalists has written that he was a jester, but not of the kind that Shakespeare drew in Yorick. He was not only—so the writer implied—the maker of jibes and fantastic devices, but the bard of friendship and affection, of melodious lyrical conceits; he was the laureate of children—dear for his "Wynken, Blynken and Nod" and "Little Boy Blue"; the scholarly book-lover, withal, who relished and paraphrased his Horace, who wrote with delight a quaint archaic English of his special devising; who collected rare books, and brought out his own "Little Books" of "Western Verse" and "Profitable Tales" in high-priced limited editions, with broad margins of paper that moths and rust do not corrupt, but which tempts bibliomaniacs to break through and steal.

For my own part, I would select Yorick as the very forecast, in imaginative literature, of our various Eugene. Surely Shakespeare conceived the "mad rogue" of Elsinore as made up of grave and gay, of wit and gentleness, and not as a mere clown or "jig maker." It is true that when Field put on his cap and bells, he too was "wont to set the table on a roar," as the feasters at a hundred tables, from

"Casey's Table d'Hôte" to the banquets of the opulent East, now rise to testify. But Shakespeare plainly reveals, concerning Yorick, that mirth was not his sole attribute—that his motley covered the sweetest nature and the tenderest heart. It could be no otherwise with one who loved and comprehended childhood and whom the children loved. And what does Hamlet say?—"He hath borne me upon his back a thousand times… Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft!" Of what is he thinking but of his boyhood, before doubts and contemplation wrapped him in the shadow, and when in his young grief or frolic the gentle Yorick, with his jest, his "excellent fancy," and his songs and gambols, was his comrade?

Of all moderns, then, here or in the old world, Eugene Field seems to be most like the survival, or revival, of the ideal jester of knightly times; as if Yorick himself were incarnated, or as if a superior bearer of the bauble at the court of Italy, or of France, or of English King Hal, had come to life again—as much out of time as Twain's Yankee at the Court of Arthur; but not out of place—for he fitted himself as aptly to his folk and region as Puck to the fays and mortals of a wood near Athens. In the days of divine sovereignty, the jester, we see, was by all odds the wise man of the palace; the real fools were those he made his butt—the foppish pages, the obsequious courtiers, the swaggering guardsmen, the insolent nobles, and not seldom majesty itself. And thus it is that painters and romancers have loved to draw him. Who would not rather be Yorick than Osric, or Touchstone than Le Beau, or even poor Bertuccio than one of his brutal mockers? Was not the redoubtable Chicot, with his sword and brains, the true ruler of France? To come to the jesters of history—which is so much less real than fiction—what laurels are greener than those of Triboulet, and Will Somers, and John Heywood—dramatist and master of the king's merry

Interludes? Their shafts were feathered with mirth and song, but pointed with wisdom, and well might old John Trussell say "That it often happens that wise counsel is more sweetly followed when it is tempered with folly, and earnest is the less offensive if it be delivered in jest."

Yes, Field "caught on" to his time—a complex American, with the obstreperous *bizarrerie* of the frontier and the artistic delicacy of our oldest culture always at odds within him—but he was, above all, a child of nature, a frolic incarnate, and just as he would have been in any time or country. Fortune had given him that unforgettable mummer's face—that clean-cut, mobile visage—that animated natural mask! No one else had so deep and rich a voice for the rendering of the music and pathos of a poet's lines, and no actor ever managed both face and voice better than he in delivering his own verses merry or sad. One night, he was seen among the audience at "Uncut Leaves," and was instantly requested to do something towards the evening's entertainment. As he was not in evening dress, he refused to take the platform, but stood up in the lank length of an ulster, from his corner seat, and recited "Dibdin's Ghost" and "Two Opinions" in a manner which blighted the chances of the readers that came after him. It is true that no clown ever equalled the number and lawlessness of his practical jokes. Above all, every friend that he had—except the Dean of his profession, for whom he did exhibit unbounded and filial reverence—was soon or late a victim of his whimsicality, or else justly distrusted the measure of Field's regard for him. Nor was the friendship perfected until one bestirred himself to pay Eugene back in kind. As to this, I am only one of scores now speaking from personal experience. There seemed to be no doubt in his mind that the victim of his fun, even when it outraged common sensibilities, *must* enjoy it as much as he. Who but Eugene, after being the welcome guest, at a European

capital, of one of our most ambitious and refined ambassadors, would have written a lyric, sounding the praises of a German "onion pie," ending each stanza with

> Ach, Liebe! Ach, mein Gott!

and would have printed it in America, with his host's initials affixed?

My own matriculation at Eugene's College of Unreason was in this wise. In 1887, Mr. Ben Ticknor, the Boston publisher, was complaining that he needed some new and promising authors to enlarge his book-list. The New York "Sun" and "Tribune" had been copying Field's rhymes and prose extravaganzas—the former often very charming, the latter the broadest satire of Chicago life and people. I suggested to Mr. Ticknor that he should ask the poet-humorist to collect, for publication in book-form, the choicest of his writings thus far. To make the story brief, Mr. Field did so, and the outcome—at which I was somewhat taken aback—was the remarkable book, "Culture's Garland," with its title imitated from the sentimental "Annuals" of long ago, and its cover ornamented with sausages linked together as a coronal wreath! The symbol certainly fitted the greater part of the contents, which ludicrously scored the Chicago "culture" of that time, and made Pullman, Armour, and other commercial magnates of the Lakeside City special types in illustration. All this had its use, and many of the sufferers long since became the *farceur's* devoted friends. The Fair showed the country what Chicago really was and is. Certainly there is no other American city where the richest class appear so enthusiastic with respect to art and literature. "The practice of virtue makes men virtuous," and even if there was some pretence and affectation in the culture of ten years ago, it has resulted in as high

standards of taste as can elsewhere be found. Moreover, if our own "four hundred" had even affected, or made it the fashion to be interested in, whatever makes for real culture, the intellectual life of this metropolis would not now be so far apart from the "social swim." There were scattered through "Culture's Garland" not a few of Field's delicate bits of verse. In some way he found that I had instigated Mr. Ticknor's request, and, although I was thinking solely of the publisher's interests, he expressed unstinted gratitude. Soon afterwards I was delighted to receive from him a quarto parchment "breviary," containing a dozen ballads, long and short, engrossed in his exquisitely fine handwriting, and illuminated with colored borders and drawings by the poet himself. It must have required days for the mechanical execution, and certainly I would not now exchange it for its weight in diamonds. This was the way our friendship began. It was soon strengthened by meetings and correspondence, and never afterwards broken.

Some years ago, however, I visited Chicago, to lecture, at the invitation of its famous social and literary "Twentieth Century Club." This was Eugene's opportunity, and I ought not to have been as dumfounded as I was, one day, when our evening papers copied from the "Chicago Record" a "very pleasant joke" at the expense of his town and myself! It was headed: "Chicago Excited! Tremendous Preparations for His Reception," and went on to give the order and route of a procession that was to be formed at the Chicago station and escort me to my quarters—stopping at Armour's packing-yards and the art-galleries on the way. It included the "Twentieth Century Club" in carriages, the "Browning Club" in busses, and the "Homer Club" in drays; ten millionnaire publishers, and as many pork-packers, in a chariot drawn by white horses, followed by not less than two hundred Chicago poets afoot! I have no doubt that

Eugene thought I would enjoy this kind of advertisement as heartily as he did. If so, he lacked the gift of putting himself in the other man's place. But his sardonic face, a-grin like a school-boy's, was one with two others which shone upon me when I did reach Chicago, and my pride was not wounded sufficiently to prevent me from enjoying the restaurant luncheon to which he bore me off in triumph. I did promise to square accounts with him, in time, and this is how I fulfilled my word. The next year, at a meeting of a suburban "Society of Authors," a certain lady-journalist was chaffed as to her acquaintanceship with Field, and accused of addressing him as "Gene." At this she took umbrage, saying: "It's true we worked together on the same paper for five years, but he was always a perfect gentleman. I *never* called him 'Gene.'" This was reported by the press, and gave me the refrain for a skit entitled "Katharine and Eugenio:"

Five years she sate a-near him
  Within that type-strewn loft;
She handed him the paste-pot,
  He passed the scissors oft;
They dipped in the same inkstand
  That crowned their desk between,
Yet—he never called her Katie,
  She never called him "Gene."

Though close—ah! close—the droplight
  That classic head revealed,
She was to him Miss Katharine,
  He—naught but Mister Field;
Decorum graced his upright brow
  And thinned his lips serene,
And, though he wrote a poem each hour,
  Why should she call him "Gene?"

She gazed at his sporadic hair—
  She knew his hymns by rote;
They longed to dine together
  At Casey's table d'hôte;
Alas, that Fortune's "hostages"—
  But let us draw a screen!

He dared not call her Katie;
  How *could* she call him "Gene?"

I signed my verses "By one of Gene's Victims"; they appeared in *The Tribune*, and soon were copied by papers in every part of the country. Other stanzas, with the same refrain, were added by the funny men of the southern and western press, and it was months before 'Gene' saw the last of them. The word "Eugenio," which was the name by which I always addressed him in our correspondence, left him in no doubt as to the initiator of the series, and so our "Merry War" ended, I think, with a fair quittance to either side.

Grieving, with so many others, over Yorick's premature death, it is a solace for me to remember how pleasant was our last interchange of written words. Not long ago, he was laid very low by pneumonia, but recovered, and before leaving his sickroom wrote me a sweetly serious letter—with here and there a sparkle in it—but in a tone sobered by illness, and full of yearning for a closer companionship with his friends. At the same time he sent me the first editions, long ago picked up, of all my earlier books, and begged me to write on their fly-leaves. This I did; with pains to gratify him as much as possible, and in one of the volumes wrote this little quatrain:

TO EUGENE FIELD

Death thought to claim you in this year of years,
  But Fancy cried—and raised her shield between—
"Still let men weep, and smile amid their tears;
  Take any two beside, but spare Eugene!"

In view of his near escape, the hyperbole, if such there was, might well be pardoned, and it touched Eugene so manifestly that—now that the eddy indeed has swept him away, and the Sabine Farm mourns for its new-world

Horace—I cannot be too thankful that such was my last message to him.

Eugene Field was so mixed a compound that it will always be impossible quite to decide whether he was wont to judge critically of either his own conduct or his literary creations. As to the latter, he put the worst and the best side by side, and apparently cared alike for both. That he did much beneath his standard, fine and true at times—is unquestionable, and many a set of verses went the rounds that harmed his reputation. On the whole, I think this was due to the fact that he got his stated income as a newspaper poet and jester, and had to furnish his score of "Sharps and Flats" with more or less regularity. For all this, he certainly has left pieces, compact of the rarer elements, sufficient in number to preserve for him a unique place among America's most original characters, scholarly wits, and poets of brightest fancy. Yorick is no more! But his genius will need no chance upturning of his grave-turf for its remembrance. When all is sifted, its fame is more likely to strengthen than to decline.

EDMUND CLARENCE STEDMAN.

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THE HOLY CROSS

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Whilst the noble Don Esclevador and his little band of venturesome followers explored the neighboring fastnesses in quest for gold, the Father Miguel tarried at the shrine which in sweet piety they had hewn out of the stubborn rock in that strangely desolate spot. Here, upon that serene August morning, the holy Father held communion with the saints, beseeching them, in all humility, to intercede with our beloved Mother for the safe guidance of the fugitive Cortes to his native shores, and for the divine protection of the little host, which, separated from the Spanish army, had wandered leagues to the northward, and had sought refuge in the noble mountains of an unknown land. The Father's devotions were, upon a sudden, interrupted by the approach of an aged man who toiled along the mountain-side path—a man so aged and so bowed and so feeble that he seemed to have been brought down into that place, by means of some necromantic art, out of distant centuries. His face was yellow and wrinkled like ancient parchment, and a beard whiter than Samite streamed upon his breast, whilst about his withered body and shrunken legs hung faded raiment which the elements had corroded and the thorns had grievously rent. And as he toiled along, the aged man continually groaned, and continually wrung his palsied hands, as if a sorrow, no lighter than his years, afflicted him.

"In whose name comest thou?" demanded the Father Miguel, advancing a space toward the stranger, but not in threatening wise; whereat the aged man stopped in his course and lifted his eyebrows, and regarded the Father a goodly time, but he spake no word.

"In whose name comest thou?" repeated the priestly man. "Upon these mountains have we lifted up the cross of our blessed Lord in the name of our sovereign liege, and here have we set down a tabernacle to the glory of the

Virgin and of her ever-blessed son, our Redeemer and thine —whoso thou mayest be!"

"Who is thy king I know not," quoth the aged man, feebly; "but the shrine in yonder wall of rock I know; and by that symbol which I see therein, and by thy faith for which it stands, I conjure thee, as thou lovest both, give me somewhat to eat and to drink, that betimes I may go upon my way again, for the journey before me is a long one."

These words spake the old man in tones of such exceeding sadness that the Father Miguel, touched by compassion, hastened to meet the wayfarer, and, with his arms about him, and with whisperings of sweet comfort, to conduct him to a resting-place. Coarse food in goodly plenty was at hand; and it happily fortuned, too, that there was a homely wine, made by Pietro del y Saguache himself, of the wild grapes in which a neighboring valley abounded. Of these things anon the old man partook, greedily but silently, and all that while he rolled his eyes upon the shrine; and then at last, struggling to his feet, he made as if to go upon his way.

"Nay," interposed the Father Miguel, kindly; "abide with us a season. Thou art an old man and sorely spent. Such as we have thou shalt have, and if thy soul be distressed, we shall pour upon it the healing balm of our blessed faith."

"Little knowest thou whereof thou speakest," quoth the old man, sadly. "There is no balm can avail me. I prithee let me go hence, ere, knowing what manner of man I am, thou hatest me and doest evil unto me." But as he said these words he fell back again even then into the seat where he had sat, and, as through fatigue, his hoary head dropped upon his bosom.

"Thou art ill!" cried the Father Miguel, hastening to his side. "Thou shalt go no farther this day! Give me thy staff,"—and he plucked it from him.

Then said the old man: "As I am now, so have I been these many hundred years. Thou hast heard tell of me—canst thou not guess my name; canst thou not read my sorrow in my face and in my bosom? As thou art good and holy through thy faith in that symbol in yonder shrine, hearken to me, for I will tell thee of the wretch whom thou hast succored. Then, if it be thy will, give me thy curse and send me on my way."

Much marvelled the Father Miguel at these words, and he deemed the old man to be mad; but he made no answer. And presently the old man, bowing his head upon his hands, had to say in this wise:—

"Upon a time," he quoth, "I abided in the city of the Great King—there was I born and there I abided. I was of good stature, and I asked favor of none. I was an artisan, and many came to my shop, and my cunning was sought of many—for I was exceeding crafty in my trade; and so, therefore, speedily my pride begot an insolence that had respect to none at all. And once I heard a tumult in the street, as of the cries of men and boys commingled, and the clashing of arms and staves. Seeking to know the cause thereof, I saw that one was being driven to execution—one that had said he was the Son of God and the King of the Jews, for which blasphemy and crime against our people he was to die upon the cross. Overcome by the weight of this cross, which he bore upon his shoulders, the victim tottered in the street and swayed this way and that, as though each moment he were like to fall, and he groaned in sore agony. Meanwhile about him pressed a multitude that with vast clamor railed at him and scoffed him and smote

him, to whom he paid no heed; but in his agony his eyes were alway uplifted to heaven, and his lips moved in prayer for them that so shamefully entreated him. And as he went his way to Calvary, it fortuned that he fell and lay beneath the cross right at my very door, whereupon, turning his eyes upon me as I stood over against him, he begged me that for a little moment I should bear up the weight of the cross whilst that he wiped the sweat from off his brow. But I was filled with hatred, and I spurned him with my foot, and I said to him: 'Move on, thou wretched criminal, move on. Pollute not my doorway with thy touch—move on to death, I command thee!' This was the answer I gave to him, but no succor at all. Then he spake to me once again, and he said: 'Thou, too, shalt move on, O Jew! Thou shalt move on forever, but not to death!' And with these words he bore up the cross again and went upon his way to Calvary.

"Then of a sudden," quoth the old man, "a horror filled my breast, and a resistless terror possessed me. So was I accursed forevermore. A voice kept saying always to me: 'Move on, O Jew! move on forever!' From home, from kin, from country, from all I knew and loved I fled; nowhere could I tarry—the nameless horror burned in my bosom, and I heard continually a voice crying unto me: 'Move on, O Jew! move on forever!' So, with the years, the centuries, the ages, I have fled before that cry and in that nameless horror; empires have risen and crumbled, races have been born and are extinct, mountains have been cast up and time hath levelled them—still I do live and still I wander hither and thither upon the face of the earth, and am an accursed thing. The gift of tongues is mine—all men I know, yet mankind knows me not. Death meets me face to face, and passes me by; the sea devours all other prey, but will not hide me in its depths; wild beasts flee from me, and pestilences turn their consuming breaths elsewhere. On and on and on I go—not to a home, nor to my people, nor to

my grave, but evermore into the tortures of an eternity of sorrow. And evermore I feel the nameless horror burn within, whilst evermore I see the pleading eyes of him that bore the cross, and evermore I hear his voice crying: 'Move on, O Jew! move on forevermore!'"

"Thou art the Wandering Jew!" cried the Father Miguel.

"I am he," saith the aged man. "I marvel not that thou dost revolt against me, for thou standest in the shadow of that same cross which I have spurned, and thou art illumined with the love of him that went his way to Calvary. But I beseech thee bear with me until I have told thee all—then drive me hence if thou art so minded."

"Speak on," quoth the Father Miguel.

Then said the Jew: "How came I here I scarcely know; the seasons are one to me, and one day but as another; for the span of my life, O priestly man! is eternity. This much know you: from a far country I embarked upon a ship—I knew not whence 't was bound, nor cared I. I obeyed the voice that bade me go. Anon a mighty tempest fell upon the ship and overwhelmed it. The cruel sea brought peace to all but me; a many days it tossed and buffeted me, then with a cry of exultation cast me at last upon a shore I had not seen before, a coast far, far westward whereon abides no human thing. But in that solitude still heard I from within the awful mandate that sent me journeying onward, 'Move on, O Jew! move on;' and into vast forests I plunged, and mighty plains I traversed; onward, onward, onward I went, with the nameless horror in my bosom, and—that cry, that awful cry! The rains beat upon me; the sun wrought pitilessly with me; the thickets tore my flesh; and the inhospitable shores bruised my weary feet—yet onward I went, plucking what food I might from thorny bushes to stay my hunger, and