

ABBIE BROWN

KISINGTON
TOWN

Abbie Brown

Kisington Town

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Kisington Town

I: HAROLD

Once upon a time there was a peaceful Kingdom which you will hardly find upon the map. In one corner of the Kingdom by the sea was the pretty little Town of Kisington, where a great many strange things had happened in the past, the chronicles of which filled the town library.

On the High Street of Kisington lived a boy named Harold, who was chief of all the boys in town. He could run faster, jump higher, solve a problem more quickly, and throw a ball farther than any other lad of his age. He was tall and straight and broad-shouldered. His hair was brown and curly, and his eyes were sky-color, – sometimes blue, sometimes gray, sometimes almost black. All the boys liked Harold, especially Richard and Robert, his chums. And Harold liked all the boys and their doings; especially these same two, Robert and Richard.

Harold was the son of a poor widow; one of the poorest in the Kingdom. But though she was so poor, the mother of Harold was determined that her son should be a scholar, because he liked books. And she worked early and late to earn the money for his education.

When Harold was not in school or playing out of doors with the other boys, he always had a book in his hand. Often this happened in the town library, where Harold loved to go. But almost as often it happened at home. For though Harold liked to read to himself, he liked quite as well to read aloud to his mother, who ever since she was a tiny child had always been so busy taking care of other people that she had never found time to learn to read for herself. The greatest happiness of her life came in the evening when her work was done. Then she could sit in a cozy chair in their cottage and hear her boy read the exciting books which he got from the library of Kisington. And the other boys – especially Richard and Robert – liked also to hear Harold read; for his voice was agreeable and he read simply and naturally, without any gestures or tremulous tones, without pulling queer faces such as make listeners want to sink through the floor with embarrassment.

Every time Harold read a story aloud he liked it better than before; every time he read aloud he read better than he had done the last time, until there was nobody in Kisington, not even the Librarian himself, who was so good a reader as Harold. But the other boys were not jealous, Harold was so good-natured and always ready to read to them.

The Librarian was a very important personage indeed in Kisington. You see, this was a peaceful Kingdom, where books were more thought of than bullets, and libraries than battleships. The Librarian wore a splendid velvet gown with fur upon the hood, and a gold chain around his neck with a medal, and he was second in importance only to the Lord Mayor himself.

One summer evening the windows of the cottage where Harold and his mother lived were wide open, and Harold was reading aloud to her. For a wonder, they were quite by themselves. The Librarian, who was a lonely old fellow without chick or child of his own, happened to be passing down the High Street when he heard the sound of a voice reading. It read so well that he stopped to listen. Presently he tapped on the door and begged to be invited within the better to hear the reading. The widow was very proud and pleased, you may be sure. She bade the Librarian welcome, and Harold continued to read until curfew sounded for every one to go to bed. The Librarian patted him on the head and asked if he might come again to hear such good reading. He came, in fact, the very next night.

After that Harold usually had an audience of at least two on the long evenings, even when the other boys were busy. The Librarian became his fast friend. He liked to come to the little cottage better than anywhere else in the world, except to his own library. But at the library he in turn was host,

and Harold became his guest. And he showed Harold many wonderful things in that library of which no one but the Librarian knew the existence, – strange histories, forgotten chronicles, wonder-tales. Gradually Harold became almost as well acquainted with the books as was the Librarian himself; though, of course, he did not at first understand them all. Nothing happens all at once. The other fellows called Harold the "Book-Wizard."

The library was a beautiful building on the main square, close by the Lord Mayor's house and the belfry, where swung the great town bell. It was open freely to every one, from morning until night, and any one could always get any book he wanted, for there were many copies of each book. The caretakers always knew just where to find the book one wished. Or the reader might go in and choose for himself; which is a pleasanter thing when you have forgotten the name of your book, or do not know just which book you want most until you have looked about.

The shelves of the library were nice and low, so that, no matter how little you were, you could reach the books without standing on tiptoe or climbing a dangerous ladder. And everywhere in the library were well-lighted tables to put books on, and cozy chairs, and crickets for your feet, and cushions for your back. There were wide window-seats, too, where between chapters one could curl up and look down into a beautiful garden.

The air of the library was always sweet and clean. The books were always bright and fresh. There was no noise, nor dust, nor torn pages, nor cross looks to disturb one. The people who took care of the books were civil and obliging. It was indeed a very rare and unusual library. No wonder Harold and the Librarian and all the other citizens of Kisington loved it and were proud of it and used it very often.

II: THE SIEGE OF KISINGTON

Now, when Harold was about twelve years old, a terrible thing befell his city. Red Rex, ruler of the neighboring land across the border, decided to make war on this peaceful Kingdom, just for fun. He was a fierce and powerful King, and he had a fierce and powerful army, always ready, night and day. One morning, without any warning whatever, they marched right up to the walls of Kisington, which were never defended, and laid siege to the city. They began to batter the gates and mine the walls and fire into the city arrows and cannon-balls, or whatever were the fashionable missiles of that long-past day. The peaceful city was in danger of being utterly destroyed.

The people of Kisington were greatly distressed. Though they were brave, they did not want to fight. They had no time for fighting, there were so many more interesting things to attend to: agriculture and commerce, science and art and music, study and play and happiness, all of which come to an end when fighting begins. They did not want to fight; but neither did they want their beautiful city destroyed, with all its treasures.

There was no telephone, no telegraph in those days. Messages went by horses. It would be days before help could come from their own King Victor, who lived in the Capital City. In the mean time what could be done to save Kisington? The Lord Mayor set the great bell to tolling in the belfry, and this called together the Chief Citizens in the hall of the library to consider the emergency.

"Alas!" quoth the Lord Mayor, trying to make himself heard in the horrid din that was arising from the city gates, "our fair city is threatened, and will be taken in a few hours unless we can devise some plan of wisdom. Force we have not, as you all know. Force is the argument of barbarians. Already a missile has knocked down the statue of Progress from the portal of the library, and I fear that the whole building is doomed. For it is at our library that the enemy seem to be directing their malice."

A groan of anguish answered him. Then the Librarian spoke up. "Ah! the misguided King! He does not love books. If only he knew the treasures he is threatening to destroy! He cannot understand."

"No. He knows not what he does," said the Lord Mayor solemnly. "He is war-mad and cannot understand anything else. If he had been brought up to love peace and learning and progress better than war and blood, he would be a different man. He would be seeking to know our books in love, not to destroy them with hate. If he had but read our Chronicles, surely he would not wish to put an end to this our unique treasure."

The Librarian started at his words and jumped to his feet. "You give me an idea, my Lord Mayor!" he cried. "Can we not cause him to change his mind? Can we not interest him in our books, enthrall him in the Chronicles of Kisington, so that he will cease to make war? Can we not at least gain time until our King Victor and his allies shall come to our aid?"

Boom! went the cannon, and *Crash!* the statue of a great poet fell from the portal of the library.

The Lord Mayor shuddered. "It is an idea," he agreed. "There is a faint hope. Something must be done, and that quickly. How shall we begin, Sir Librarian?"

The Librarian turned to the shelves behind him and took down at random a book bound in red-and-gold. "Here, let us begin with this," he said. "It may not be the best of all our Chronicles, but if the warlike King can be induced to read it through, it may serve to hold his wrath for a space."

"Who will go with the volume into the enemy's camp?" asked the Lord Mayor dubiously.

"We must send our best reader," said the Librarian. "Red Rex must hear the tale read aloud, the better to hold his unaccustomed attention."

"Surely, you are the best reader, Sir Librarian," urged the Lord Mayor generously. "How we all admire your style and diction!"

Crash! The rainbow window above their heads was shattered into a thousand pieces.

The Lord Mayor turned pale. "We must make haste!" he urged, pushing the Librarian gently by the elbow.

"Nay," said the Librarian coolly, releasing himself. "There is one who reads far better than I. It is a young boy, the son of a poor widow living on the High Street. Harold is his name, and he reads as sweetly as a nightingale sings. Let us send for him at the same time when our messenger goes to King Victor."

"Let it be done immediately!" commanded the Lord Mayor.

This happened on a Saturday, when the boys were not at school. But on account of the bombardment of the city, the Lord Mayor had already given orders that every child should remain in his own home that morning. So Harold was with his mother when the messenger from the Lord Mayor knocked on the door of the little cottage in the High Street, and Robert and Richard did not know anything about it.

"Come with me!" said the messenger to Harold. "You are needed for important service."

"Oh, where is he going?" cried the poor, trembling mother, holding back her boy by the shoulders.

"He is to come directly to the library," said the messenger. "The Librarian has a task for him."

"Ah! The Librarian!" The mother sighed with relief, and let her hands fall from the shoulders of Harold. "To that good man of peace I can trust my son, even amid this wicked bombardment."

When Harold came to the library with the messenger, they found the beautiful portal of the building quite destroyed, and the windows lying in pitiful shattered fragments. They entered under a rain of missiles, and discovered the Leading Citizens gathered in a pale group in the center of the hall, under a heavy oak table.

"My boy!" said the Librarian, with as much dignity as possible under the circumstances. "We have sent for you, believing that you only can save our beautiful library, our books, our city, our people, from immediate destruction. Will you risk your life for all these, Harold?"

Harold looked at him bravely. "I do not know what you mean, sir," he said, "but gladly would I risk my life to save the precious books alone. Tell me what I am to do, and I will do it as well as a boy can."

"Well spoken, my brave lad!" cried the Librarian. "You are to do this"; and he thrust into the hand of Harold a red-and-gold volume. "Even as the boy David of old conquered the Philistine with a child's toy, so you may perhaps conquer this Philistine with a story-book. Go to the savage King yonder, with a flag of truce; and if you can win his ear, beg to read him this, which is of an importance. If you read as well as I have heard you do ere now, I think he will pause in his work of destruction, at least until the story's end."

Harold took the book, wondering. "I will try my best, sir," he promised simply.

III. RED REX

A committee of the First Citizens led Harold to the city gate. He wished to say good-bye to his mother, and to Richard and Robert; but there was no time. Presently a watchman raised a white flag above the wall. Thereafter the noise of the besiegers ceased.

"A truce, ho!"

"What message from the besieged?"

"One comes to parley with your King."

"Let him come forth, under the flag of truce. He will be safe."

Bearing the white flag in one hand and the gorgeous book in the other, Harold stepped outside the gate. The foreign soldiers stared to see so young a messenger, and some of them would have laughed. But Harold held up his head proudly and showed them that he was not afraid, nor was he to be laughed at.

"I am the messenger. Pray bring me to the King," he said with dignity.

A guard of fierce-looking soldiers took him in charge and marched him across the trampled sward, between the ranks of the army, until they came to a little hillock. And there Harold found himself standing in front of a huge man with bristling red hair and beard, having a mighty arm bound with iron. His eyes were wild and bloodshot. He sat upon the hillock as if it were a throne, and held a wicked-looking sword across his great knees, frowning terribly.

"Well, who are you, and what do you want with me?" growled the Red King. "A queer envoy this! A mere boy!"

"The City Fathers have sent me to read you something, please Your Majesty," said Harold, trying to look brave, though his knees were quaking at the awful appearance of the War-Lord.

"Is it a war message?" asked Red Rex, eyeing the red-and-gold book suspiciously.

"You must hear and judge," answered Harold.

"Very well," grumbled the Red King. "But waste no time. Begin and have done as quickly as may be."

Harold began to read from the red-and-gold book; but he had not gone far when Red Rex interrupted him.

"Why, it is a tale!" he roared. "Thunder and lightning! Do they think this is a child's party? Go home with your story-book to your nursery and leave me to deal with your city in warrior fashion."

"I come from no nursery!" protested Harold, squaring his shoulders. "I am no molly-coddle. No boy can beat me at any game. I am instructed to read you this, and I must do so, unless you break the truce and do me harm."

"Who ever heard the like of this!" thundered Red Rex. "Here am I making real war, and this boy interrupts me to read a tale! What a waste of time! I read nothing, boy. War dispatches are all I have taste for. Does this concern war?"

"It has everything to do with this war," said Harold truthfully. "It is very important, and they say I read rather well."

"When did you learn to read rather well?" questioned the Red King sulkily. "I never learned to read well, myself, and I am thrice your age. I never have had time. At your years I was already a soldier. Fighting was the only sport I cared for. Reading is girls' business."

"A lot of good things are girls' business, and boys' business, too," said Harold loyally. "But please hear me read about the fight, Your Majesty."

"About a fight; – it is a long time since I heard a story about a fight, written in ink," said the Red King musingly. "But I have myself seen many fights, written in red blood."

"This is a story different from any you ever read," said Harold. "It is a story no one ever heard read before, outside Kisington. Will Your Majesty permit that I begin?"

Red Rex hummed and hawed, hesitated and frowned. But he was a curious King, as well as a savage one, and his curiosity triumphed. "What ho!" he shouted to his guard at last. "Let there be a truce until I give word to resume the fighting. I have that which claims my attention. Boy, I will hear the story. Plant the flag of truce upon this hillock and sit down here at my feet. Now!" He unfastened his belt and sword, took off his heavy helmet and made himself comfortable, while his men lolled about in the grass near by. Harold seated himself at the feet of the Red King, as he was bidden; and opening the red-and-gold book began to read in his best manner the story of *The Dragon of Hushby*.

IV. THE DRAGON OF HUSHBY, PART I

Long, long ago, in the days when even stranger things befell than we see nowadays, travelers brought news to the little town of Kisington-by-the-Sea. They said that the terrible Dragon of Hushby had wakened again from his fifty years' nap; had crept out of his cave in the mountain, and was terrifying the country as he had done in the grandfathers' times. Already he had destroyed ten horses; had eaten one hundred head of cattle, six fair maidens, and twelve plump little children. Besides which he had killed three brave men who had dared to fight with him. But now no one ventured near the cave where the dreadful creature lived, and the land was filled with horror for which there seemed to be no hope of relief.

Moreover, so the travelers said, the King proclaimed that whoever should put an end to the terror of Hushby might ask of his sovereign whatever reward he chose, even the hand of the King's daughter. Now when this news came to Kisington there was great excitement. For Hushby Town was not far distant from the market-place of Kisington. People gathered in groups talking in whispers of the Dragon, and looking fearfully out of the corners of their eyes as they spoke. Who could tell when the creature might wander in their direction, as the Chronicles recorded that he had done once, long ago, when he had destroyed the daughter of him who was Lord Mayor at that time? Kisington had special reasons, you see, for longing to hear that a hero had conquered the Dragon.

Of all the people in Kisington who heard the news, the one most excited thereby was a lad named Arthur. He did not look like a hero, for he was short, and small, and ugly. For this reason no one had ever thought him especially brave. Most people expect heroes to be great, big men. Arthur was held to be of little account in Kisington. But though he was a little fellow, he had a great heart. All his life he had loved tales of bravery and adventure, and he longed to be a hero. Besides, he thought it would be a fine thing to marry the King's daughter, who, like all princesses, must be very beautiful.

Arthur lived by himself in a castle which had once belonged to his uncle. Now that uncle had been an Amateur Magician; that is, he was always doing things with flaring fires and queer bottles, messes of strange liquids and horrid smells, – hoping to learn how to turn old iron into gold, or to discover some other useful secret. No one ever heard, however, of his accomplishing anything; until one day, with a *Bang!* he blew himself up. And every one heard of that. His will gave all his Amateur-Magical stuff to Arthur—all his forges and bellows and bulbs and bottles, the syrups and nasty smells. But Arthur cared nothing at all about Amateur Magic, and scarcely ever went into the desolate tower in one wing of the castle, where his uncle's laboratory was gathering dust.

But after news came about the Dragon of Hushby, things were different. An idea had come into Arthur's head. "Oh, dear!" he said to himself. "If only I could find something which would make me big! Only a giant could kill the Dragon of Hushby, he is so huge and terrible. Perhaps my uncle may have discovered a secret which would turn me into a giant!"

Eagerly he hurried to the deserted room. Everything was draped in dusty cobwebs, and when he opened the door the rats went scuttling in all directions. All among the bottles and boxes and books and bundles he sought and sought for some discovery which should help him. But though he found many other curious things, he found not what he sought. Though he poked in every dark corner and read carefully the labels on every phial, and the recipes in every book, he found no Secret for Growing Big. He could have learned, had he wished, "How to Make a Silk Purse Out of a Sow's Ear"; "How to Make a Horse Drink"; "How to Make an Empty Sack Stand Upright," and other very difficult things. But all these secrets were of no use to Arthur, and he thought that his uncle had wasted much valuable time in making these discoveries. Which, indeed, was true.

Arthur grew more and more discontented every day. But one morning, quite by accident, he hit his elbow against a hidden spring in a certain knot-hole of the wall in the dusty laboratory. Immediately a secret panel opened, and there behind it was a secret cupboard. In the cupboard was

the secretest-looking package, wrapped in a velvet cloth. Arthur unrolled it eagerly and found a little leather case. When the case was opened, he saw inside a bit of glass set in gold, with a handle. It looked quite like a modern reading-glass-only reading-glasses were not invented until many, many years later. "What can this be?" said Arthur to himself. And taking up the glass he looked through it. Wonderful! Everything suddenly seemed to become small-just as it does nowadays when we look through the wrong end of an opera-glass. But Arthur had never seen an opera-glass, you know; this was so many hundreds of years ago.

Arthur looked around the room, and everything had suddenly become so tiny that it made him laugh. In the window a huge spider-as big as his hand-had been spinning her web. Now she was no larger than a dot. A rat scampered across the floor, and as Arthur looked it shrank to the size of a fly! A bird flew past the window, singing, and it grew smaller as it flew, while its voice became tinier and tinier till it sounded like the buzzing of an insect. Amazed, Arthur took down the glass from his eye. Instantly everything appeared again of its natural size-all except the spider and the rat and the bird. They remained tiny as they had seemed through the glass. Arthur had magicked them!

"Ho!" cried Arthur. "This is some of my uncle's Amateur Magic. He had, indeed, discovered how to make living things grow small. Alas! That helps me little. I am small enough now. But if only it worked the other way I might become a giant. What a pity! what a pity! Stay-perhaps if I reverse the glass something better may be done!"

He was about to turn the glass over and raise it to his eye again, when he spied a bit of parchment in the box. On it were scribbled some words, in faded ink.

"A Wondrous Device to Make the Living Small. Thrice More May It be Used Before Its Virtue Fades."

"Ah!" said Arthur, laying down the glass. "Then, as I feared, the glass can only make things smaller. But I have an idea! What if I should look with this glass upon the Dragon of Hushby? Would he not shrink as the spider and the rat and the bird have done? Yes; and then I should no longer have need to be a giant, for I could tame him, even I myself in my proper form! It is a good thought. I may yet be the hero of Kisington. But I must be careful of the precious glass and not waste its powers. 'Thrice more may it be used,' so says the scroll. Once, then, for the Dragon, and two times more for accidents that may happen."

Without more ado Arthur made ready for his great adventure. For arms he took but two things-the magic glass in his wallet, and a butterfly-net over his shoulder. In truth, the little fellow looked more like a schoolboy bound for a holiday in the woods, than a hero in quest of honor.

Now, first, without saying aught of his intent to any in Kisington, he journeyed to the Capital City, to gain the King's permission for the trial.

With the handle of his butterfly-net he thumped upon the door of the King's palace and said: "Open! I wish to speak with the King!"

The warders looked at him and laughed; he was such a strange little figure. "What do you want of the King?" they asked.

"Tell him that I come to seek his favor before I go forth to conquer the Dragon of Hushby."

"Ho, ho!" roared the warders. But they went and told the King what Arthur said. "He is mad, Your Majesty," they added. "He is a little fellow, armed with a butterfly-net. Ho, ho!"

The King laughed, too. But he was curious to see this champion. So he had Arthur admitted. With his net over his shoulder, Arthur marched into the long hall, between the rows of tittering courtiers, and knelt before the King. "So you intend to slay the Dragon of Hushby?" said the King. "It needs a giant for that deed. What will you do, forsooth, you little fellow, with your butterfly-net?"

"Your Majesty," said Arthur, "do you not remember how David was a little fellow, when with a stone he slew the giant Goliath? Well, I am another little fellow; but I have a stone in my pocket with which I mean to tame a foe more terrible than David's was. And as for this net-wait, and you shall see!"

"Very well," said the King, laughing, "I will wait and see. But what reward shall you ask if you are successful?"

"Your Majesty," said Arthur politely, "may I ask to see your daughter? I have heard that the Dragon-Slayer may hope to win her hand."

At these words of Arthur's the King burst into a roar of laughter, and clapped his knee, as though it were a mighty joke. And all the courtiers held their sides and shook with mirth. But Arthur was angry, for he did not see that he had said anything funny.

"Ho! ho!" roared the King. "Heralds, bid my daughter Agnes to come hither. He! he! For there is one who wishes to see her. Ha! ha!"

While the room was still echoing with laughter, the heralds entered with the King's daughter, and Arthur saw why every one had laughed. The Princess was a giantess, – a head taller than any man present, – and though she was very beautiful, her face was hard and cold, and she looked bad-tempered. When she walked, the floor trembled, and when she spoke, the glasses shivered.

"Who wishes to see me?" she said in a deep voice, crossly.

"Heavens!" said Arthur to himself, "this is a Princess, indeed! It will be more of a task to tame her than any dragon. But she is very handsome, and I have my magic glass. When we are married I will turn her into a nice little girl, just the size for me. So all will be well."

The King pointed to Arthur with his scepter. "Behold our champion," he said, chuckling. "My daughter, it is for you to hope that this brave fellow may slay the Dragon of Hushby. For in that case I vow to make you his wife."

"Huh!" said the Princess, looking down at Arthur and frowning. But Arthur advanced and made a low bow to her. "For such a great prize, Your Highness," he said, "a man would venture much."

At these words the Princess looked crosser than ever, and tossed her head. "Take care that the Dragon does not swallow you at a mouthful, Dwarf!" she said, very impolitely, and every one laughed.

Arthur turned red with anger. "I will take care," he said. "And I shall win what I will and conquer where I choose. Farewell, my lady. We shall have more words hereafter, when I come to claim you for my wife."

"You shall have her if you win her," said the King.

But, of course, no one thought there was any hope for the little fellow. They believed him to be mad, and when he had gone they nearly died, laughing at the huge joke. The Princess laughed loudest of all.

Proudly Arthur set forth upon the King's errand, with the magic glass in his pocket, and the butterfly-net over his shoulder. A number of merry fellows followed him from the court to see the issue of his mad adventure. For they thought there would be a thing to laugh at ere the end of the matter. They jested with Arthur and gibed pleasantly at him. But he answered them gayly and kept his temper, for he knew that they meant no harm.

But with them journeyed one of a different sort. And this was Oscar, a burly ruffian, whose joy was in evil, and who followed Arthur hoping for a chance to rob him, since he seemed a fool who had some precious treasure in his wallet, which he was forever handling. Him Arthur did not like, and he watched Oscar, but had no words with him.

V. THE DRAGON OF HUSHBY, PART II

After a time, Arthur and his band came to the town of Hushby, and were received with wonder; for the people thought them all mad, especially Arthur, with his butterfly-net and his boast to slay the Dragon. But they treated him gratefully, as one who sought to be their deliverer, albeit shaking their heads over his small stature and slender strength.

Arthur slept that night at the inn, intending to seek the Dragon on the morrow. And about the inn, on benches, on the curbs of Hushby streets, and under the trees, slept the merry jesters who had followed Arthur from the King. And Oscar thought to rob Arthur while he slept; but he was prevented.

In the night came the Dragon down from his cave in the mountain, and rushing up the village street nearly caught Oscar as he was climbing in at the window of the inn. Oscar fled barely in time. But the Dragon caught and ate in one mouthful two of the merry band of jesters, so that they jested no longer. Then there was a great outcry and panic. But Arthur slept soundly through it all, dreaming of the Princess, and how fair she would be when he had made her his wife and had magicked her with the glass.

In the morning bright and early Arthur came down to table. He found the landlord and all the people white and trembling.

"Oh, sir!" cried Mine Host in a whisper. "Behold, the Dragon has descended from the mountain in the darkness and has eaten two of the King's men this night. His appetite is whetted, and we hear him roaring afar off. It is a sign that he will soon again make another descent upon us. In the name of St. George, haste to save us!"

Arthur listened and heard the far-off thunder of the loathly worm. But he did not tremble. He only drew himself up to his last inch and frowned, fingering the magic glass in his wallet.

"First will I breakfast," he said. "And then will I go forth to rid you of this pest. Bring on the morning meal."

When he had eaten heartily, even to the last crumb, Arthur arose and took his butterfly-net in hand.

"Farewell, noble youth!" cried Mine Host, with tears in his eyes. For Arthur had paid his score generously, and the landlord did not expect to see the little fellow again. The landlord's fair daughter, Margot, stood weeping, with the corner of her apron to her eyes. For she admired the brave lad mightily. She was a very little maid, no taller than Arthur's shoulder, and he looked at her kindly when he saw her weep.

"What a fair, sweet maid!" he said to himself. "If it were not for the King's daughter, I would choose her for my Lady, and ask her to give me the blue ribbon from her hair to wear in my cap. But that may not be. I must win glory for the King's big daughter."

He patted Margot on the head and said debonairly: "Farewell! And have a goodly dinner ready against my return. For I shall bring with me a Dragon's appetite."

So he spoke, jesting upon the terrible subject. Margot wept harder than ever, and his other hearers shuddered. Some of the people followed him afar off. But when, nearer and nearer, they heard the Dragon's roars shaking the hills, they turned about and fled back to the village, leaving Arthur to go his way alone.

Arthur was not afraid. He strode on manfully until he came to the valley which led up the mountain where the Dragon lived. And as he strode he whistled. Presently there was a roar and a rumble and a rattle, and Arthur stopped whistling. Nearer and nearer it came, and at last, down from the rocks writhed the terrible Dragon himself. And he was far worse to look upon than Arthur had imagined.

He was as big as twenty elephants, and he was green, covered with shining scales. His eyes glowed like the head-lights of two engines, and revolved horribly in his head. Steam and fire belched

from his huge mouth, and he snapped his long, sharp teeth disgustingly. He was a terrifying sight as he writhed toward Arthur. Dreadfully he roared, lashing right and left with his tail, which uprooted the trees and bushes and dislodged the rocks on either hand till they came tumbling down in an avalanche. His hot breath scorched everything about him, and Arthur began to feel faint by reason of the poison in it. But he stood quite still, waiting for the Dragon, and fingering his magic glass. It was to be a mighty experiment.

Arthur waited until the Dragon was only a few yards away. Then he put the glass to his eye and stared hard at the beast; stared, and stared, and stared.

Such rudeness made the Dragon very angry. He roared louder than ever and came rushing toward Arthur at redoubled speed. But behold! As Arthur gazed at him the creature began to grow smaller and smaller. First he was no bigger than an elephant, though still terrible. Then he shrank to the size of a crocodile; then of a lion; and finally, when he was only a few feet away, he was no bigger than a cat, snarling and spitting fiercely as ever.

By this time the Dragon began to see that something was wrong. He did not know that he himself was changed, but it seemed to him that Arthur had swelled. It seemed to him that Arthur was a terrible giant; and, for the first time in his five thousand years of life, the Dragon was afraid!

Suddenly he turned tail and began to run away, all the while growing littler and littler in quite a ridiculous fashion. But Arthur was after him valiantly. Now the Dragon was no bigger than a lizard, making a funny squeak as he wriggled through the bushes. His eyes shone like tiny lucifer matches, and his mouth smoked like a cigarette. But for this it would have been hard to see him as he scuttled through the moss and under the ferns, trying to escape from Arthur's terrible eye.

At last Arthur saw that it was high time to lay aside the magic glass, unless he wished the Dragon to escape by "going out" altogether, which would never do. For he must take the creature back to the King.

Now was seen the use of the butterfly-net which Arthur had brought all the way from Kisington. With this in his right hand Arthur chased the absurd little Dragon under a stone, and finally threw it over the wriggling body, just as one would catch an insect. Hurrah! There was the creature tangled in the net, hissing as loudly as a locust. The terrible Dragon of Hushby was caught!

Arthur took from his wallet a reel of thread and tied the Dragon securely, so that he might not escape. And then, chuckling to himself, he strode back to Hushby pulling the Dragon behind him, just as a little boy drags a toy horse by a string. It was a very funny sight!

When he drew near the inn, Margot ran out to meet him with tears of joy in her eyes, for she had been watching for him all this time. Then all the other people came running out, and they cheered lustily when they saw that Arthur was quite unharmed.

"But what of the Dragon?" they said.

"This of the Dragon!" cried Arthur, drawing from behind him the struggling creature. "Here is the famous Terror of Hushby. Behold what I have done to him!"

Folk could scarce believe their eyes. This wriggling little lizard, could he really be their famous Dragon? Then they saw his tiny, fiery eyes, and the smoke coming from his funny little mouth; and they knew it must be a really, truly Dragon. A great silence fell upon them, and every one looked at Arthur in awe. They believed that he must be a wizard who had magicked the Dragon of Hushby. But after that they fell to rejoicing, because now no longer had they anything to fear. Arthur had become the hero of Hushby.

They set him on a seat and carried him on their shoulders around the village, with singing and shouting and huzzaing. And the Dragon went with him, spitting and hissing and lashing his absurd little scaly tail inside a cage made of fine wire. Arthur enjoyed all this greatly. But especially he enjoyed the eyes of little Margot, which followed him, full of admiration. And he said to himself, "It is a fine thing to be a hero. But I wish I had not asked for the King's daughter as my reward. I could choose better now!"

When night came Arthur slept once more at the inn, with the Dragon in his little cage beside the bed. Arthur slept soundly, because he was happy and his heart was honest. But the conquered Dragon did not sleep. You see, his conscience was bad, – he had eaten so many poor and deserving persons. And that gives the worst kind of indigestion.

There was another who did not sleep. And this was Oscar, the wicked. He had seen the Dragon when Arthur showed him to the people, and he knew that the strange little beast was a treasure worth far more than gold or jewels. For there was not another like it in the whole world. He meant to steal the miniature Dragon and carry it to a far land, where he could exhibit it in a museum and gain much wealth and honor. Of course, Oscar meant also to claim that this was a young Dragon which he had taken in a brave struggle with its parents, whom Oscar had killed. In that way, he would become a famous hero.

In the dead of night, when all the inn was quiet, Oscar softly climbed up the trellis to the window of the room where Arthur slept. In the darkness two tiny red spots showed him where the Dragon writhed and wriggled restlessly. Stealthily Oscar reached out his hand to take the Dragon. But when he did so the Dragon gave a hiss which he meant should shake the house, but which really was no louder than the chirp of a cricket. It was loud enough, however, to waken Arthur. The hero sprang from the bed to guard his treasure.

Oscar drew his dagger and rushed upon Arthur. But Arthur had been careful to sleep with his hand upon his trusty weapon. Swiftly he put the magic glass to his eye and looked at Oscar. And lo! the wicked man shared the Dragon's fate. Gradually he shrank and shrank, and though he struck fiercely with his dagger it was of little moment; for Oscar was soon but two inches high, and his dagger's prick was like that of a pin, which made Arthur laugh.

Arthur was merciful, and did not put him out entirely, as he could easily have done. Dropping the glass from his eye he picked up in his thumb and finger the little fellow, struggling like a beetle, and put him under an overturned pint-pot for safe keeping. There Oscar remained until morning, a restless neighbor of the restless Dragon.

But Arthur said to himself, "I have used the magic glass twice. I must be careful, for it can be used only once more before its virtue fades; and that chance must be saved to make my Princess little, since, alas! I must marry her and not dear Margot." Then Arthur went back to bed and slept soundly until morning.

On the morrow Arthur said nothing about this night's event to Mine Host nor to the admiring crowd who came to see him set forth on his triumphant journey to the King. He tied Oscar with thread and put him into his wallet, where the wicked fellow snarled and scolded in a chirp that no one could hear. As for the Dragon, Arthur fastened a tiny gold chain about his neck and secured it to his doublet, so that the creature could crawl up and down his shoulder but could not get away. He looked like one of the little chameleons which ladies sometimes wear; though why they like such unhappy living ornaments I cannot tell.

VI. THE DRAGON OF HUSHBY, PART III

Amid hurrahs and blessings and a rain of flowers, Arthur said farewell to Margot, who loved him, and to Hushby, which he had delivered from the Terror; and once more he journeyed to the King. But this time he went as a hero, whose fame had traveled before him.

The King sent heralds and soldiers to meet him, and a golden chariot to bring him to the city. When Arthur reached the palace he found a great banquet prepared, and the King himself came to welcome him and led him to the place of honor. But the Princess Agnes was not there.

As for the Dragon, every one was mad with delight over the wonderful little creature. When the King saw him he laughed so that his crown nearly fell into the soup. He delighted to tickle the Dragon's tail and hear him spit and hiss like a little tea-kettle. He liked the Dragon much better in this small edition, for he was more conveniently handled. They placed the Dragon's cage in the center of the table, where every one could see him, and the Dragon glared fiercely with his little red eyes, but no one was afraid. How times had changed since this was the Terror of Hushby!

Then the King said: "Brave Arthur, this Dragonet is the choicest treasure of my kingdom. I will keep him in a cage of gold beside my throne, and strangers will come from the ends of the world to see him. It will make my reign famous for all time, and I am very grateful to you. You are a clever fellow, and perhaps, since you have tamed a Dragon, you can tame my daughter as no one else has been able to do, – not even the late Queen or myself. Now, then, to keep my promise. What ho, heralds! Lead forth the maid."

The heralds blew a joyous blast on their trumpets and went to fetch the Princess Agnes. Arthur found himself thinking of little Margot at the inn, and how sadly she had looked after him when he went away. But he knew that, being a hero, he must accept the responsibilities of that position and marry the Princess. He felt nervously in his wallet for the magic glass, for he said to himself:

"Since I must marry this giantess, between whom and me is little love, let me be sure that I can make her small like myself; else there will be no happiness in my family. As soon as we are wed I will stare at the big girl until she shrinks into the proper size, as did Oscar and the Dragon."

Arthur felt into the corners of his wallet for the magic glass-but it was not there! Hurriedly he searched again. It was gone! What was to be done? Must he, then, marry the giant girl and be a slave to her cruel temper all his life? Horrible thought! What had become of the glass? Suddenly he remembered Oscar, who had also been put into the wallet. Oscar likewise was gone!

Arthur saw what had happened. With his little dagger Oscar had cut the threads which bound him and had escaped, taking the magic glass with him.

"What makes your face so pale, brave Arthur?" asked the King jokingly. "Is it the thought of your dainty little bride?"

Even as Arthur opened his lips to answer, there came a shrill cry from beneath his very nose. Looking down he saw Oscar standing on the table and peering over his beaker of wine. In both arms he held the magic glass, and he was turning its shining eye upon Arthur himself.

"Revenge!" cried the little fellow, fiercely. "Revenge! I have learned his secret. I will gaze him smaller and smaller, until he goes out. Nothing can save him!"

Before Arthur could move, Oscar pressed his face to the glass and began to stare as through a window, his malicious eyes fixed upon Arthur's face. With horror Arthur waited to feel himself shrink. He looked about fearfully at the other guests, expecting to see them appear to swell into giants as he himself grew tiny. He stared at Oscar again, who should now seem larger than himself.

But what was this? Nothing happened. The guests were staring open-mouthed with surprise, but they were of the usual size, Oscar was still a tiny dwarf. Arthur rubbed his eyes and looked again. Still nothing happened. The glass seemed to have lost its magic!

Suddenly, Arthur saw what it meant. The magic of the glass was to last only for three trials. Once, before he knew its worth, he had wasted it upon the spider, the rat, and the singing bird. Once the Dragon had felt its power. Its third and last spell had turned Oscar into a midget. Now its virtue was gone. It was but a piece of ordinary crystal, and Oscar's wicked plan was foiled!

With a squeal of rage Oscar threw the glass crashing upon the floor, and stamped his foot, which made everybody laugh. It was as if a tiny mouse had stamped.

The King stretched out his hand and took up the little fellow curiously. "What is this strange insect?" he asked. "Your Majesty," said Arthur, "he is Oscar, a villain who seeks to mischief everybody. I have punished him as I punished the Dragon, because he tried to rob me of my most precious treasure. He can do no more harm, I think."

"Oscar!" said the King. "Indeed, I know him well. More than once has he done evil in my city, and I have long meant to punish him. You are a clever fellow to handle him so tactfully. And now, we will dub him 'Companion of the Dragon.' He, too, shall have a little cage of gold and shall live with the Dragon for his neighbor. A quaint pair they, Arthur! I thank you for them. But where is my daughter, and why does she delay?"

With horror Arthur heard these words. He had forgotten the Princess. Alas! The glass had lost its power. How then was he to magic her and make her small, as he had hoped to do? How was he to tame this terrible big girl and make her a nice little wife? Arthur wished that he had never set out to be a hero; he awaited the approach of his bride with terror far greater than he had felt in the Dragon's glen.

Presently the heralds came back to the King, and their faces were very grave. "Your Majesty," they said, "we cannot bring the Princess. She has gone; she has fled from the Kingdom with the first royal coachman, who was a handsome young giant after her own heart. Even now they must be far beyond the border of the neighboring Kingdom. She was heard to say that she would have no dwarf for a husband, however great a hero he might be. And when she knew what had happened to the Dragon of Hushby, she was afraid."

There was silence in the banquet hall. Then the King struck a blow on the table with his fist that made the Dragon hop and hiss nervously, while Oscar fell over and bumped his head on a salt cellar. "Well," said the King, "so be it! She was an ill-tempered jade, and I could do nothing with her. You are well rid of her, brave Arthur. But how can I amend this insult to your dignity? Ask of me whatever you choose, and it will not be enough."

Now, instead of looking sad, Arthur's face was shining with joy at his narrow escape. "Your Majesty," he said, "I ask no amend. The lady had a right to her choice, and I hope she may have a giant happiness. Since this royal marriage may not be for me, I must look elsewhere. But I have had enough of adventure and of magic, and I shall now retire into private life."

"Some reward you must have, nevertheless," said the King. "You shall retire nobly. Arise, Sir Arthur! I make you Knight of the Dragon, Lord of the Hushby Marches, and Earl of Kisington. Moreover, whomsoever and wheresoever you choose to wed, I myself will attend the nuptials and will bestow upon the bride a countess's crown of diamonds. Long live the hero of Hushby and Earl of Kisington!"

"Long live the hero of Hushby and Earl of Kisington!" echoed all the guests. The Dragon hissed spitefully and lashed out with his tail, but no one paid any attention to him. Oscar, sulking with elbows on knees, groaned squeakily. But no one paid any attention to him either.

Everybody was thinking of Arthur, and how wonderfully he had become a hero. But Arthur himself was thinking of little Margot at the inn, and how sweet her face would look under the coronet of a countess. And Arthur grinned happily.

VII. THE BARGAIN

You must not suppose that Harold read this whole story to the besieging King without pause. When he reached the end of the first part of the tale, Harold closed the red-and-gold volume and looked up.

"Go on!" urged the Red King. "Why do you stop, boy?"

"It is the end of the volume," said Harold.

Red Rex frowned. "Surely, not the end of the tale!" he cried. "Why, you have stopped short in the middle! That Oscar was up to some trick, I know. I want to hear what happened next."

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," repeated Harold. "It is the end of the volume. The rest of the tale is told in another book."

The Red King's eyes blazed with anger. "Why did you not bring the other book with you?" he roared.

"I was not sure that Your Majesty would like the tale," said Harold. "Besides, they will allow one to take from the library but one book at a time from a set of volumes."

"Then you must return and get the next volume immediately," commanded Red Rex. "I must know what happened to Arthur in his quest of the Dragon. Take the flag of truce and go back to Kisington; and let it not be long ere you return!"

"I am sorry, Your Majesty," said Harold, "but it is too late to take out another book to-day. The rules of the library are very strict."

"Now, did any one ever hear anything so absurd as this!" thundered the Red King, stamping like a bad-tempered child. "What is a mere library, forsooth, to have rules which I may not break?"

"You have rules for your army, do you not?" suggested Harold.

"I should say, verily!" growled Red Rex; "strict, stern rules."

"Well, a library is an army of books," answered Harold; "a peaceful army intended to help people and to make them happy; not to kill them. Our noble Librarian, who is general of a mighty army of books, must have rules as stern and strict to keep his army useful and efficient. If Your Majesty desires the rest of the tale you must wait until to-morrow."

"I will destroy the whole town first!" roared the angry King.

"Then you will never learn the end of the tale," retorted Harold.

It looked as if Harold were in great danger, in spite of the flag of truce. Red Rex stormed and ranted, and his soldiers stood ready with their weapons to do whatever he should bid them. But after a while the warrior's wrath somewhat calmed itself, and shortly he began to chuckle noisily.

"True!" he said. "If I destroy the library I shall not know the end of that tale. That would be a calamity! Well, it is now too late to resume the siege to-day. I may as well continue the truce until to-morrow. But see that you return early in the morning, with the rest of the tale."

Once more Harold shook his head. "I must go to Church to-morrow morning," he replied. "It is Sunday, you know. Surely, you do not fight on Sundays, Your Majesty?"

The Red King looked at him sideways. "I had forgotten Sunday," he said. "I have mislaid my calendar. Now, you remind me, – no, I suppose not. No, I do not fight on Sundays."

"I thought not!" said Harold, relieved. "It would not be quite knightly, would it? I will return to-morrow afternoon, as soon as I have had my dinner; and then we will go on with the story of the Dragon of Hushby. Good day, Your Majesty!"

"Good day!" growled Red Rex, watching him march away between the files of soldiers. "Youngster!" he called after the boy, "be sure you bring back the right volume."

Harold waved his hand in assent.

Now, when Harold told the Librarian and the other Leading Citizens what he had done, they were greatly pleased; for they saw that their city was safe for at least eighteen hours, while their

mounted messenger went speeding to King Victor. Harold's chums Robert and Richard were so excited they could not sleep that night. Harold's mother was as proud as a peacock when he told the story to her; though it was with some dread that she looked forward to his return on the morrow into the camp of the fierce besieger. But Harold said: -

"I shall be quite safe, Mother. Never fear! Red Rex is too much interested in my story to hurt me. When he forgets war he is a different man. He is almost pleasant, Mother!"

"What a stupid King he must be to choose war for his pleasure!" said the mother. "But suppose he cannot wait for to-morrow afternoon? Suppose he should decide to take the city and win the library for himself, so that he can read all the books at his leisure. What then?"

"Mother," said Harold, "I believe Red Rex has no joy in reading for himself; no more than you have, - though he may not have your excuse."

"La la!" cried the mother. "What a King is that who has no key to the treasury of books! You are richer than he, my son. With all his armies, you are more powerful than he, my dear son!"

On the Sunday, after dinner, Harold's friends escorted him to the gate; and as before he went to the Red King under the flag of truce. In his hand he bore the second volume of red-and-gold. Red Rex received him sulkily, yet with a certain eagerness.

"Well, boy, have you brought the book?" he asked. "I have been thinking of that tale all the night long, all this morning long. Come, let us hear what happened next to Arthur and the Dragon." Then Harold began the second part of the tale. Red Rex kept him at it, and would not let him rest until he had quite finished both the second and the third parts of the story; though Harold had meant to gain time by reading only the former on that occasion.

But when he had quite finished, Red Rex sat up, rubbing his hands together. "It is a good story!" he declared. "That Arthur was a brave fellow. I am glad I did not destroy your library until I had heard about him. But now I can return to the siege without delay. I give you warning, my boy! Do not go back to that doomed town. Desert those peace-lovers and come with me to be a fighter, like Arthur."

"Arthur fought wicked Dragons, not men," said Harold. "I would not desert if I could. I, too, am a peace-lover, and there is too much in Kisington from which I could not part. Besides, I must return this book safe and sound to the library, even if it is to be destroyed soon after, or I shall be fined. My poor mother can ill afford to pay fines for me!"

"But there will be no one left to fine you," retorted the Red King. "The whole city will be destroyed, - the library, the Librarian, the Lord Mayor, and all! What a ruination it will be!" He rubbed his hands gleefully.

Harold shuddered, but he was firm. "What a pity!" he said. "You really should know our Librarian. And there are still many fine books which Your Majesty ought to hear. You will never know them if they be destroyed now; their duplicates exist nowhere."

"There are none so good as the tale you have just finished, I warrant!" cried Red Rex.

"Oh, many far better than that, Your Majesty!" said Harold. "Indeed, that is one of the least important. - Did you ever hear of the Wonder-Garden, Your Majesty?"

"The Wonder-Garden!" echoed the Red King; "no, that I never did. What means a 'wonder-garden,' boy?"

"Ah, that you will never know, for it is another of the secret tales of Kisington," said Harold. "It is all about a Mermaid, and a Lord Mayor's son, and a fair stranger maiden, who-now I bethink me-might be from your own land across the border. The Wonder-Garden was hers."

"A maid from my land, with a wonder-garden!" mused Red Rex. "I would fain learn of her. I dare say there is good fighting in this tale also. Come, boy; will you read me that tale to-morrow?"

"Yes, Your Majesty; if you will give your kingly word that the truce shall last until the story be finished," replied Harold.

"Ho-hum!" the Red King hesitated. He mumbled and he grumbled; he winked and he blinked. But at last he said grudgingly, "Well, I promise. No soldier shall advance, no weapon shall be discharged until I have heard the tale of your Wonder-Garden."

With this promise, Harold joyfully hastened back to the beleaguered city. Kisington was safe for another day! The Lord Mayor and the Librarian shook hands and went to congratulate Harold's mother.

As for Red Rex, he dreamed that Harold had bewitched him with a red-and-gold book; as perhaps he had done. Were not Richard and Robert at that moment clapping Harold on the shoulder and declaring that he was indeed a "Book-Wizard"? This is the tale which Harold read to Red Rex on the following day; the story of *The Wonder-Garden*.

VIII. THE WONDER-GARDEN

There never were seen such beautiful gardens as bloomed in Kisington-by-the-Sea. Not only every chateau and villa had its parterres spread with blooming rugs of all colors; but each white-washed cottage, every thatched hut, boasted its garden-plot of dainty posies. Each had some quaint device or some special beauty which distinguished it from the others. For there was great horticultural rivalry in Kisington-by-the-Sea.

Now this was all because Hugh, the Lord Mayor, who was very fond of flowers, had offered a prize for the prettiest garden in the town. The Lord Mayor himself lived on a hill in the center of the town, in the midst of the most beautiful garden of all. It flowed down the hillside from the summit in ripples of radiant color, – roses and lilies, pinks and daffodils, larkspur and snapdragon. All the flowers of the land were there, and many foreigners beside.

Through the garden wound the yellow driveway by which the Lord Mayor passed in his golden coach. He loved to drive slowly down this road, sniffing the fragrance of his flowers; and then out through the streets of the town, observing the beautiful gardens on every hand, – the result of his own love for flowers.

When the Lord Mayor saw all the fair maidens down on their knees in the flower-beds, watering the buds with their little green water-pots, nipping off dead leaves, pulling up scrawny weeds, coaxing the delicate creepers to climb, he would rub his hands and say: –

"Ah, this is good! This is very good indeed! We shall have the most beautiful town in the world, blossoming with flowers, and the most beautiful maids in the world, blossoming with health and sweetness like the flowers they tend. It will be hard to tell which is the fairer, the maidens or the flowers. Hey! Is it not so, my son?"

Then he would chuckle and poke in the ribs the young man who rode beside him.

The Lord Mayor's son was very good to look upon; tall and fair, with curly golden locks and eyes as brown as the heart of a yellow daisy. When he drove through the town with the Lord Mayor, the maidens down on their knees in their garden-plots would pause a moment from their chase of a wriggling worm or a sluggish slug to look after the golden coach and sigh gently. Then they would turn back to their Bowers more eagerly than before. For there was the prize!

You see, the Lord Mayor's son was himself part of the prize to be won. The Lord Mayor had vowed that Cedric, his son, should marry the girl who could show by late summer the most beautiful garden in Kisington-by-the-Sea. Moreover, he promised to build a fine palace to overlook this prize garden, and there the young couple should live happy ever after, like any Prince and Princess. And this was why the maids worked so hard in the gardens of Kisington-by-the-Sea, and why the flowers blossomed there as no flowers ever blossomed before.

Now one day the Lord Mayor drove through the village in his golden coach and came out upon the downs near the seashore. And there, quite by itself, he found a little cottage which he had never before seen: a tiny cottage which had no sign of a garden anywhere about it, – only a few flowers growing in cracked pots on the window-sills, and on the bench just outside the door.

"What!" cried the Lord Mayor, stopping the coach. "What does this mean? There should be a garden here. I must look to the reason for this contempt of my offer." And he jumped down from the coach and rapped sharply upon the door.

Presently the door opened, and there stood a girl, all in rags, but so beautiful that the Lord Mayor's son, who was sitting languidly in the golden coach, shut his eyes as one does when a great light shines suddenly in one's face.

"Hey!" cried the Lord Mayor, frowning. "Why have you no garden, girl? Have you no pride? Do you not dream to win the prize which I offer?"

"I am a stranger," said the maiden timidly. "No one has told me of a prize. What may it be, my Lord?"

"It is a prize worth trying for," said the Lord Mayor. "The hand of my son there, and the finest palace in the land for the mistress of the prize garden. Does that thought please you, girl? If not, you are different from all the other maidens."

The girl lifted her eyes to the golden coach and met the gaze of Cedric fixed upon her. "I love flowers," she said. "I had once a little garden in my old home. But now I am too poor to buy plants and bulbs and seedlings. How, then, shall I make a garden to please Your Lordship?"

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