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MALVINA OF BRITTANY

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Malvina of Brittany

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Jerome K. Jerome

Malvina of Brittany

MALVINA OF BRITTANY

THE PREFACE

The Doctor never did believe this story, but claims for it that, to a great extent, it has altered his whole outlook on life.

"Of course, what actually happened – what took place under my own nose," continued the Doctor, "I do not dispute. And then there is the case of Mrs. Marigold. That was unfortunate, I admit, and still is, especially for Marigold. But, standing by itself, it proves nothing. These fluffy, giggling women – as often as not it is a mere shell that they shed with their first youth – one never knows what is underneath. With regard to the others, the whole thing rests upon a simple scientific basis. The idea was 'in the air,' as we say – a passing brain-wave. And when it had worked itself out there was an end of it. As for all this Jack-and-the-Beanstalk tomfoolery – "

There came from the darkening uplands the sound of a lost soul. It rose and fell and died away.

"Blowing stones," explained the Doctor, stopping to refill his pipe. "One finds them in these parts. Hollowed out during the glacial period. Always just about twilight that one hears it. Rush of air caused by sudden sinking of the temperature. That's how all these sort of ideas get started."

The Doctor, having lit his pipe, resumed his stride.

"I don't say," continued the Doctor, "that it would have happened without her coming. Undoubtedly it was she who supplied the necessary psychic conditions. There was that about her – a sort of atmosphere. That quaint archaic French of hers – King Arthur and the round table and Merlin; it seemed to recreate it all. An artful minx, that is the only explanation. But while she was looking at you, out of that curious aloofness of hers – "

The Doctor left the sentence uncompleted.

"As for old Littlecherry," the Doctor began again quite suddenly, "that's his speciality – folklore, occultism, all that flummery. If you knocked at his door with the original Sleeping Beauty on your arm he'd only fuss round her with cushions and hope that she'd had a good night. Found a seed once – chipped it out of an old fossil, and grew it in a pot in his study. About the most dilapidated weed you ever saw. Talked about it as if he had re-discovered the Elixir of Life. Even if he didn't say anything in actually so many words, there was the way he went about. That of itself was enough to have started the whole thing, to say nothing of that loony old Irish housekeeper of his, with her head stuffed full of elves and banshees and the Lord knows what."

Again the Doctor lapsed into silence. One by one the lights of the village peeped upward out of the depths. A long, low line of light, creeping like some luminous dragon across the horizon, showed the track of the Great Western express moving stealthily towards Swindon.

"It was altogether out of the common," continued the Doctor, "quite out of the common, the whole thing. But if you are going to accept old Littlecherry's explanation of it – "

The Doctor struck his foot against a long grey stone, half hidden in the grass, and only just saved himself from falling.

"Remains of some old cromlech," explained the Doctor. "Somewhere about here, if we were to dig down, we should find a withered bundle of bones crouching over the dust of a prehistoric luncheon-basket. Interesting neighbourhood!"

The descent was rough. The Doctor did not talk again until we had reached the outskirts of the village.

"I wonder what's become of them?" mused the Doctor. "A rum go, the whole thing. I should like to have got to the bottom of it."

We had reached the Doctor's gate. The Doctor pushed it open and passed in. He seemed to have forgotten me.

"A taking little minx," I heard him muttering to himself as he fumbled with the door. "And no doubt meant well. But as for that cock-and-bull story – "

I pieced it together from the utterly divergent versions furnished me by the Professor and the Doctor, assisted, so far as later incidents are concerned, by knowledge common to the village.

I. THE STORY

It commenced, so I calculate, about the year 2000 B.C., or, to be more precise – for figures are not the strong point of the old chroniclers – when King Heremon ruled over Ireland and Harbundia was Queen of the White Ladies of Brittany, the fairy Malvina being her favourite attendant. It is with Malvina that this story is chiefly concerned. Various quite pleasant happenings are recorded to her credit. The White Ladies belonged to the "good people," and, on the whole, lived up to their reputation. But in Malvina, side by side with much that is commendable, there appears to have existed a most reprehensible spirit of mischief, displaying itself in pranks that, excusable, or at all events understandable, in, say, a pixy or a pigwidgeon, strike one as altogether unworthy of a well-principled White Lady, posing as the friend and benefactress of mankind. For merely refusing to dance with her – at midnight, by the shores of a mountain lake; neither the time nor the place calculated to appeal to an elderly gentleman, suffering possibly from rheumatism – she on one occasion transformed an eminently respectable proprietor of tin mines into a nightingale, necessitating a change of habits that to a business man must have been singularly irritating. On another occasion a quite important queen, having had the misfortune to quarrel with Malvina over some absurd point of etiquette in connection with a lizard, seems, on waking the next morning, to have found herself changed into what one judges, from the somewhat vague description afforded by the ancient chroniclers, to have been a sort of vegetable marrow.

Such changes, according to the Professor, who is prepared to maintain that evidence of an historical nature exists sufficient to prove that the White Ladies formed at one time an actual living community, must be taken in an allegorical sense. Just as modern lunatics believe themselves to be china vases or poll-parrots, and think and behave as such, so it must have been easy, the Professor argues, for beings of superior intelligence to have exerted hypnotic influence upon the superstitious savages by whom they were surrounded, and who, intellectually considered, could have been little more than children.

"Take Nebuchadnezzar." I am still quoting the Professor. "Nowadays we should put him into a strait-waistcoat. Had he lived in Northern Europe instead of Southern Asia, legend would have told us how some Kobold or Stromkarl had turned him into a composite amalgamation of a serpent, a cat and a kangaroo." Be that as it may, this passion for change – in other people – seems to have grown upon Malvina until she must have become little short of a public nuisance, and eventually it landed her in trouble.

The incident is unique in the annals of the White Ladies, and the chroniclers dwell upon it with evident satisfaction. It came about through the betrothal of King Heremon's only son, Prince Gerbot, to the Princess Berchta of Normandy. Malvina seems to have said nothing, but to have bided her time. The White Ladies of Brittany, it must be remembered, were not fairies pure and simple. Under certain conditions they were capable of becoming women, and this fact, one takes it, must have exerted a disturbing influence upon their relationships with eligible male mortals. Prince Gerbot may not have been altogether blameless. Young men in those sadly unenlightened days may not, in their dealings with ladies, white or otherwise, have always been the soul of discretion and propriety. One would like to think the best of her.

But even the best is indefensible. On the day appointed for the wedding she seems to have surpassed herself. Into what particular shape or form she altered the wretched Prince Gerbot; or into what shape or form she persuaded him that he had been altered, it really, so far as the moral responsibility of Malvina is concerned, seems to be immaterial; the chronicle does not state: evidently something too indelicate for a self-respecting chronicler to even hint at. As, judging from other passages in the book, squeamishness does not seem to have been the author's literary failing, the sensitive reader can feel only grateful for the omission. It would have been altogether too harrowing.

It had, of course, from Malvina's point of view, the desired effect. The Princess Berchta appears to have given one look and then to have fallen fainting into the arms of her attendants. The marriage was postponed indefinitely, and Malvina, one sadly suspects, chortled. Her triumph was short-lived.

Unfortunately for her, King Heremon had always been a patron of the arts and science of his period. Among his friends were to be reckoned magicians, genii, the Nine Korrigans or Fays of Brittany – all sorts of parties capable of exerting influence, and, as events proved, only too willing. Ambassadors waited upon Queen Harbundia; and Harbundia, even had she wished, as on many previous occasions, to stand by her favourite, had no alternative. The fairy Malvina was called upon to return to Prince Gerbot his proper body and all therein contained.

She flatly refused. A self-willed, obstinate fairy, suffering from swelled head. And then there was that personal note. Merely that he should marry the Princess Berchta! She would see King Heremon, and Anniamus, in his silly old wizard's robe, and the Fays of Brittany, and all the rest of them – ! A really nice White Lady may not have cared to finish the sentence, even to herself. One imagines the flash of the fairy eye, the stamp of the fairy foot. What could they do to her, any of them, with all their clacking of tongues and their wagging of heads? She, an immortal fairy! She would change Prince Gerbot back at a time of her own choosing. Let them attend to their own tricks and leave her to mind hers. One pictures long walks and talks between the distracted Harbundia and her refractory favourite – appeals to reason, to sentiment: "For my sake." "Don't you see?" "After all, dear, and even if he did."

It seems to have ended by Harbundia losing all patience. One thing there was she could do that Malvina seems either not to have known of or not to have anticipated. A solemn meeting of the White Ladies was convened for the night of the midsummer moon. The place of meeting is described by the ancient chroniclers with more than their usual exactitude. It was on the land that the magician Kalyb had, ages ago, raised up above all Brittany to form the grave of King Taramis. The "Sea of the Seven Islands" lay to the north. One guesses it to be the ridge formed by the Arree Mountains. "The Lady of the Fountain" appears to have been present, suggesting the deep green pool from which the river D'Argent takes its source. Roughly speaking, one would place it halfway between the modern towns of Morlaix and Callac. Pedestrians, even of the present day, speak of the still loneliness of that high plateau, treeless, houseless, with no sign of human hand there but that high, towering monolith round which the shrill winds moan incessantly. There, possibly on some broken fragment of those great grey stones, Queen Harbundia sat in judgment. And the judgment was – and from it there was no appeal – that the fairy Malvina should be cast out from among the community of the White Ladies of Brittany. Over the face of the earth she should wander, alone and unforgiven. Solemnly from the book of the roll-call of the White Ladies the name of Malvina was struck out for ever.

The blow must have fallen upon Malvina as heavily as it was unexpected. Without a word, without one backward look, she seems to have departed. One pictures the white, frozen face, the wide-open, unseeing eyes, the trembling, uncertain steps, the groping hands, the deathlike silence clinging like grave-clothes round about her.

From that night the fairy Malvina disappears from the book of the chroniclers of the White Ladies of Brittany, from legend and from folklore whatsoever. She does not appear again in history till the year A.D. 1914.

II. HOW IT CAME ABOUT

It was on an evening towards the end of June, 1914, that Flight Commander Raffleton, temporarily attached to the French Squadron then harboured at Brest, received instructions by wireless to return at once to the British Air Service Headquarters at Farnborough, in Hampshire. The night, thanks to a glorious full moon, would afford all the light he required, and young Raffleton determined to set out at once. He appears to have left the flying ground just outside the arsenal at Brest about nine o'clock. A little beyond Huelgoat he began to experience trouble with the carburettor. His idea at first was to push on to Lannion, where he would be able to secure expert assistance; but matters only getting worse, and noticing beneath him a convenient stretch of level ground, he decided to descend and attend to it himself. He alighted without difficulty and proceeded to investigate. The job took him, unaided, longer than he had anticipated. It was a warm, close night, with hardly a breath of wind, and when he had finished he was feeling hot and tired. He had drawn on his helmet and was on the point of stepping into his seat, when the beauty of the night suggested to him that it would be pleasant, before starting off again, to stretch his legs and cool himself a little. He lit a cigar and looked round about him.

The plateau on which he had alighted was a table-land standing high above the surrounding country. It stretched around him, treeless, houseless. There was nothing to break the lines of the horizon but a group of gaunt grey stones, the remains, so he told himself, of some ancient menhir, common enough to the lonely desert lands of Brittany. In general the stones lie overthrown and scattered, but this particular specimen had by some strange chance remained undisturbed through all the centuries. Mildly interested, Flight Commander Raffleton strolled leisurely towards it. The moon was at its zenith. How still the quiet night must have been was impressed upon him by the fact that he distinctly heard, and counted, the strokes of a church clock which must have been at least six miles away. He remembers looking at his watch and noting that there was a slight difference between his own and the church time. He made it eight minutes past twelve. With the dying away of the last vibrations of the distant bell the silence and the solitude of the place seemed to return and settle down upon it with increased insistence. While he was working it had not troubled him, but beside the black shadows thrown by those hoary stones it had the effect almost of a presence. It was with a sense of relief that he contemplated returning to his machine and starting up his engine. It would whirl and buzz and give back to him a comfortable feeling of life and security. He would walk round the stones just once and then be off. It was wonderful how they had defied old Time. As they had been placed there, quite possibly ten thousand years ago, so they still stood, the altar of that vast, empty sky-roofed temple. And while he was gazing at them, his cigar between his lips, struggling with a strange forgotten impulse that was tugging at his knees, there came from the very heart of the great grey stones the measured rise and fall of a soft, even breathing.

Young Raffleton frankly confesses that his first impulse was to cut and run. Only his soldier's training kept his feet firm on the heather. Of course, the explanation was simple. Some animal had made the place its nest. But then what animal was ever known to sleep so soundly as not to be disturbed by human footsteps? If wounded, and so unable to escape, it would not be breathing with that quiet, soft regularity, contrasting so strangely with the stillness and the silence all round. Possibly an owl's nest. Young owlets make that sort of noise – the "snorers," so country people call them. Young Raffleton threw away his cigar and went down upon his knees to grope among the shadows, and, doing so, he touched something warm and soft and yielding.

But it wasn't an owl. He must have touched her very lightly, for even then she did not wake. She lay there with her head upon her arm. And now close to her, his eyes growing used to the shadows, he saw her quite plainly, the wonder of the parted lips, the gleam of the white limbs beneath their flimsy covering.

Of course, what he ought to have done was to have risen gently and moved away. Then he could have coughed. And if that did not wake her he might have touched her lightly, say, on the shoulder, and have called to her, first softly, then a little louder, "Mademoiselle," or "Mon enfant." Even better, he might have stolen away on tiptoe and left her there sleeping.

This idea does not seem to have occurred to him. One makes the excuse for him that he was but three-and-twenty, that, framed in the purple moonlight, she seemed to him the most beautiful creature his eyes had ever seen. And then there was the brooding mystery of it all, that atmosphere of far-off primeval times from which the roots of life still draw their sap. One takes it he forgot that he was Flight Commander Raffleton, officer and gentleman; forgot the proper etiquette applying to the case of ladies found sleeping upon lonely moors without a chaperon. Greater still, the possibility that he never thought of anything at all, but, just impelled by a power beyond himself, bent down and kissed her.

Not a platonic kiss upon the brow, not a brotherly kiss upon the cheek, but a kiss full upon the parted lips, a kiss of worship and amazement, such as that with which Adam in all probability awakened Eve.

Her eyes opened, and, just a little sleepily, she looked at him. There could have been no doubt in her mind as to what had happened. His lips were still pressing hers. But she did not seem in the least surprised, and most certainly not angry. Raising herself to a sitting posture, she smiled and held out her hand that he might help her up. And, alone in that vast temple, star-roofed and moon-illuminated, beside that grim grey altar of forgotten rites, hand in hand they stood and looked at one another.

"I beg your pardon," said Commander Raffleton. "I'm afraid I have disturbed you."

He remembered afterwards that in his confusion he had spoken to her in English. But she answered him in French, a quaint, old-fashioned French such as one rarely finds but in the pages of old missals. He would have had some difficulty in translating it literally, but the meaning of it was, adapted to our modern idiom:

"Don't mention it. I'm so glad you've come."

He gathered she had been expecting him. He was not quite sure whether he ought not to apologise for being apparently a little late. True, he had no recollection of any such appointment. But then at that particular moment Commander Raffleton may be said to have had no consciousness of anything beyond just himself and the wondrous other beside him. Somewhere outside was moonlight and a world; but all that seemed unimportant. It was she who broke the silence.

"How did you get here?" she asked.

He did not mean to be enigmatical. He was chiefly concerned with still gazing at her.

"I flew here," he answered. Her eyes opened wider at that, but with interest, not doubt.

"Where are your wings?" she asked. She was leaning sideways, trying to get a view of his back. He laughed. It made her seem more human, that curiosity about his back.

"Over there," he answered. She looked, and for the first time saw the great shimmering sails gleaming like silver under the moonlight.

She moved towards it, and he followed, noticing without surprise that the heather seemed to make no sign of yielding to the pressure of her white feet.

She halted a little away from it, and he came and stood beside her. Even to Commander Raffleton himself it looked as if the great wings were quivering, like the outstretched pinions of a bird preening itself before flight.

"Is it alive?" she asked.

"Not till I whisper to it," he answered. He was losing a little of his fear of her. She turned to him.

"Shall we go?" she asked.

He stared at her. She was quite serious, that was evident. She was to put her hand in his and go away with him. It was all settled. That is why he had come. To her it did not matter where. That was his affair. But where he went she was to go. That was quite clearly the programme in her mind.

To his credit, let it be recorded, he did make an effort. Against all the forces of nature, against his twenty-three years and the red blood pulsing in his veins, against the fumes of the midsummer moonlight encompassing him and the voices of the stars, against the demons of poetry and romance and mystery chanting their witches' music in his ears, against the marvel and the glory of her as she stood beside him, clothed in the purple of the night, Flight Commander Raffleton fought the good fight for common sense.

Young persons who, scantily clad, go to sleep on the heather, five miles from the nearest human habitation, are to be avoided by well-brought-up young officers of His Majesty's Aerial Service. The incidence of their being uncannily beautiful and alluring should serve as an additional note of warning. The girl had had a row with her mother and wanted to get away. It was this infernal moonlight that was chiefly responsible. No wonder dogs bayed at it. He almost fancied he could hear one now. Nice, respectable, wholesome-minded things, dogs. No damned sentiment about them. What if he had kissed her! One is not bound for life to every woman one kisses. Not the first time she had been kissed, unless all the young men in Brittany were blind or white blooded. All this pretended innocence and simplicity! It was just put on. If not, she must be a lunatic. The proper thing to do was to say good-bye with a laugh and a jest, start up his machine and be off to England – dear old practical, merry England, where he could get breakfast and a bath.

It wasn't a fair fight; one feels it. Poor little prim Common Sense, with her defiant, turned-up nose and her shrill giggle and her innate vulgarity. And against her the stillness of the night, and the music of the ages, and the beating of his heart.

So it all fell down about his feet, a little crumbled dust that a passing breath of wind seemed to scatter, leaving him helpless, spellbound by the magic of her eyes.

"Who are you?" he asked her.

"Malvina," she answered him. "I am a fairy."

III. HOW COUSIN CHRISTOPHER BECAME MIXED UP WITH IT

It did just occur to him that maybe he had not made that descent quite as successfully as he had thought he had; that maybe he had come down on his head; that in consequence he had done with the experiences of Flight Commander Raffleton and was now about to enter on a new and less circumscribed existence. If so, the beginning, to an adventuresome young spirit, seemed promising. It was Malvina's voice that recalled him from this train of musing.

"Shall we go?" she repeated, and this time the note in her voice suggested command rather than question.

Why not? Whatever had happened to him, at whatever plane of existence he was now arrived, the machine apparently had followed him. Mechanically he started it up. The familiar whir of the engine brought back to him the possibility of his being alive in the ordinary acceptation of the term. It also suggested to him the practical advisability of insisting that Malvina should put on his spare coat. Malvina being five feet three, and the coat having been built for a man of six feet one, the effect under ordinary circumstances would have been comic. What finally convinced Commander Raffleton that Malvina really was a fairy was that, in that coat, with the collar standing up some six inches above her head, she looked more like one than ever.

Neither of them spoke. Somehow it did not seem to be needed. He helped her to climb into her seat and tucked the coat about her feet. She answered by the same smile with which she had first stretched out her hand to him. It was just a smile of endless content, as if all her troubles were now over. Commander Raffleton sincerely hoped they were. A momentary flash of intelligence suggested to him that his were just beginning.

Commander Raffleton's subconscious self it must have been that took charge of the machine. He seems, keeping a few miles inland, to have followed the line of the coast to a little south of the Hague lighthouse. Thereabouts he remembers descending for the purpose of replenishing his tank. Not having anticipated a passenger, he had filled up before starting with a spare supply of petrol, an incident that was fortunate. Malvina appears to have been interested in watching what she probably regarded as some novel breed of dragon being nourished from tins extricated from under her feet, but to have accepted this, together with all other details of the flight, as in the natural scheme of things. The monster refreshed, tugged, spurned the ground, and rose again with a roar; and the creeping sea rushed down.

One has the notion that for Flight Commander Raffleton, as for the rest of us, there lies in wait to test the heart of him the ugly and the commonplace. So large a portion of the years will be for him a business of mean hopes and fears, of sordid struggle, of low cares and vulgar fret. But also one has the conviction that there will always remain with him, to make life wonderful, the memory of that night when, godlike, he rode upon the winds of heaven crowned with the glory of the world's desire. Now and again he turned his head to look at her, and still, as ever, her eyes answered him with that strange deep content that seemed to wrap them both around as with a garment of immortality. One gathers dimly something of what he felt from the look that would unconsciously come into his eyes when speaking of that enchanted journey, from the sudden dumbness with which the commonplace words would die away upon his lips. Well for him that his lesser self kept firm hold upon the wheel or maybe a few broken spars, tossing upon the waves, would have been all that was left to tell of a promising young aviator who, on a summer night of June, had thought he could reach the stars.

Half-way across the dawn came flaming up over the Needles, and later there stole from east to west a long, low line of mist-enshrouded land. One by one headland and cliff, flashing with gold, rose out of the sea, and the white-winged gulls flew out to meet them. Almost he expected them to turn into spirits, circling round Malvina with cries of welcome.

Nearer and nearer they drew, while gradually the mist rose upward as the moonlight grew fainter. And all at once the sweep of the Chesil Bank stood out before them, with Weymouth sheltering behind it.

It may have been the bathing-machines, or the gasometer beyond the railway station, or the flag above the Royal Hotel. The curtains of the night fell suddenly away from him. The workaday world came knocking at the door.

He looked at his watch. It was a little after four. He had wired them at the camp to expect him in the morning. They would be looking out for him. By continuing his course he and Malvina could be there about breakfast-time. He could introduce her to the colonel: "Allow me, Colonel Goodyer, the fairy Malvina." It was either that or dropping Malvina somewhere between Weymouth and Farnborough. He decided, without much consideration, that this latter course would be preferable. But where? What was he to do with her? There was Aunt Emily. Hadn't she said something about wanting a French governess for Georgina? True, Malvina's French was a trifle old-fashioned in form, but her accent was charming. And as for salary – There presented itself the thought of Uncle Felix and the three elder boys. Instinctively he felt that Malvina would not be Aunt Emily's idea. His father, had the dear old gentleman been alive, would have been a safe refuge. They had always understood one another, he and his father. But his mother! He was not at all sure. He visualised the scene: the drawing-room at Chester Terrace. His mother's soft, rustling entrance. Her affectionate but well-bred greeting. And then the disconcerting silence with which she would await his explanation of Malvina. The fact that she was a fairy he would probably omit to mention. Faced by his mother's gold-rimmed pince-nez, he did not see himself insisting upon that detail: "A young lady I happened to find asleep on a moor in Brittany. And seeing it was a fine night, and there being just room in the machine. And she – I mean I – well, here we are." There would follow such a painful silence, and then the raising of the delicately arched eyebrows: "You mean, my dear lad, that you have allowed this" – there would be a slight hesitation here – "this young person to leave her home, her people, her friends and relations in Brittany, in order to attach herself to you. May I ask in what capacity?"

For that was precisely how it would look, and not only to his mother. Suppose by a miracle it really represented the facts. Suppose that, in spite of the overwhelming evidence in her favour – of the night and the moon and the stars, and the feeling that had come to him from the moment he had kissed her – suppose that, in spite of all this, it turned out that she wasn't a fairy. Suppose that suggestion of vulgar Common Sense, that she was just a little minx that had run away from home, had really hit the mark. Suppose inquiries were already on foot. A hundred horse-power aeroplane does not go about unnoticed. Wasn't there a law about this sort of thing – something about "decoying" and "young girls"? He hadn't "decoyed" her. If anything, it was the other way about. But would her consent be a valid defence? How old was she? That would be the question. In reality he supposed about a thousand years or so. Possibly more. Unfortunately, she didn't look it. A coldly suspicious magistrate would probably consider sixteen a much better guess. Quite possibly he was going to get into a devil of a mess over this business. He cast a glance behind him. Malvina responded with her changeless smile of ineffable content. For the first time it caused him a distinct feeling of irritation.

They were almost over Weymouth by this time. He could read plainly the advertisement posters outside the cinema theatre facing the esplanade: "Wilkins and the Mermaid. Comic Drama." There was a picture of the lady combing her hair; also of Wilkins, a stoutish gentleman in striped bathing costume.

That mad impulse that had come to him with the first breath of dawn, to shake the dwindling world from his pinions, to plunge upward towards the stars never to return – he wished to Heaven he had yielded to it.

And then suddenly there leapt to him the thought of Cousin Christopher.

Dear old Cousin Christopher, fifty-eight and a bachelor. Why had it not occurred to him before? Out of the sky there appeared to Commander Raffleton the vision of "Cousin Christopher" as a

plump, rubicund angel in a panama hat and a pepper-and-salt tweed suit holding out a lifebelt. Cousin Christopher would take to Malvina as some motherly hen to an orphaned duckling. A fairy discovered asleep beside one of the ancient menhirs of Brittany. His only fear would be that you might want to take her away before he had written a paper about her. He would be down from Oxford at his cottage. Commander Raffleton could not for the moment remember the name of the village. It would come to him. It was northwest of Newbury. You crossed Salisbury Plain and made straight for Magdalen Tower. The Downs reached almost to the orchard gate. There was a level stretch of sward nearly half a mile long. It seemed to Commander Raffleton that Cousin Christopher had been created and carefully preserved by Providence for this particular job.

He was no longer the moonstruck youth of the previous night, on whom phantasy and imagination could play what pranks they chose. That part of him the keen, fresh morning air had driven back into its cell. He was Commander Raffleton, an eager and alert young engineer with all his wits about him. At this point that has to be remembered. Descending on a lonely reach of shore he proceeded to again disturb Malvina for the purpose of extracting tins. He expected his passenger would in broad daylight prove to be a pretty, childish-looking girl, somewhat dishevelled, with, maybe, a tinge of blue about the nose, the natural result of a three-hours' flight at fifty miles an hour. It was with a startling return of his original sensations when first she had come to life beneath his kiss that he halted a few feet away and stared at her. The night was gone, and the silence. She stood there facing the sunlight, clad in a Burberry overcoat half a dozen sizes too large for her. Beyond her was a row of bathing-machines, and beyond that again a gasometer. A goods train half a mile away was noisily shunting trucks.

And yet the glamour was about her still; something indescribable but quite palpable – something out of which she looked at you as from another world.

He took her proffered hand, and she leapt out lightly. She was not in the least dishevelled. It seemed as if the air must be her proper element. She looked about her, interested, but not curious. Her first thought was for the machine.

"Poor thing!" she said. "He must be tired."

That faint tremor of fear that had come to him when beneath the menhir's shadow he had watched the opening of her eyes, returned to him. It was not an unpleasant sensation. Rather it added a piquancy to their relationship. But it was distinctly real. She watched the feeding of the monster; and then he came again and stood beside her on the yellow sands.

"England!" he explained with a wave of his hand. One fancies she had the impression that it belonged to him. Graciously she repeated the name. And somehow, as it fell from her lips, it conjured up to Commander Raffleton a land of wonder and romance.

"I have heard of it," she added. "I think I shall like it."

He answered that he hoped she would. He was deadly serious about it. He possessed, generally speaking, a sense of humour; but for the moment this must have deserted him. He told her he was going to leave her in the care of a wise and learned man called "Cousin Christopher"; his description no doubt suggesting to Malvina a friendly magician. He himself would have to go away for a little while, but would return.

It did not seem to matter to Malvina, these minor details. It was evident – the idea in her mind – that he had been appointed to her. Whether as master or servant it was less easy to conjecture: probably a mixture of both, with preference towards the latter.

He mentioned again that he would not be away for longer than he could help. There was no necessity for this repetition. She wasn't doubting it.

Weymouth with its bathing machines and its gasometer faded away. King Rufus was out a-hunting as they passed over the New Forest, and from Salisbury Plain, as they looked down, the pixies waved their hands and laughed. Later, they heard the clang of the anvil, telling them they were in the

neighbourhood of Wayland Smith's cave; and so planed down sweetly and without a jar just beyond Cousin Christopher's orchard gate.

A shepherd's boy was whistling somewhere upon the Downs, and in the valley a ploughman had just harnessed his team; but the village was hidden from them by the sweep of the hills, and no other being was in sight. He helped Malvina out, and leaving her seated on a fallen branch beneath a walnut tree, proceeded cautiously towards the house. He found a little maid in the garden. She had run out of the house on hearing the sound of his propeller and was staring up into the sky, so that she never saw him until he put his hand upon her shoulder, and then was fortunately too frightened to scream. He gave her hasty instructions. She was to knock at the Professor's door and tell him that his cousin, Commander Raffleton, was there, and would he come down at once, by himself, into the orchard. Commander Raffleton would rather not come in. Would the Professor come down at once and speak to Commander Raffleton in the orchard.

She went back into the house, repeating it all to herself, a little scared.

"Good God!" said Cousin Christopher from beneath the bedclothes. "He isn't hurt, is he?"

The little maid, through the jar of the door, thought not. Anyhow, he didn't look it. But would the Professor kindly come at once? Commander Raffleton was waiting for him – in the orchard.

So Cousin Christopher, in bedroom slippers, without socks, wearing a mustard-coloured dressing-gown and a black skull cap upon his head – the very picture of a friendly magician – trotted hastily downstairs and through the garden, talking to himself about "foolhardy boys" and "knowing it would happen"; and was much relieved to meet young Arthur Raffleton coming towards him, evidently sound in wind and limb. And then began to wonder why the devil he had been frightened out of bed at six o'clock in the morning if nothing was the matter.

But something clearly was. Before speaking Arthur Raffleton looked carefully about him in a manner suggestive of mystery, if not of crime; and still without a word, taking Cousin Christopher by the arm, led the way to the farther end of the orchard. And there, on a fallen branch beneath the walnut tree, Cousin Christopher saw apparently a khaki coat, with nothing in it, which, as they approached it, rose up.

But it did not rise very high. The back of the coat was towards them. Its collar stood out against the sky line. But there wasn't any head. Standing upright, it turned round, and peeping out of its folds Cousin Christopher saw a child's face. And then looking closer saw that it wasn't a child. And then wasn't quite sure what it was; so that coming to a sudden halt in front of it, Cousin Christopher stared at it with round wide eyes, and then at Flight Commander Raffleton.

It was to Malvina that Flight Commander Raffleton addressed himself.

"This," he said, "is Professor Littlecherry, my Cousin Christopher, about whom I told you."

It was obvious that Malvina regarded the Professor as a person of importance. Evidently her intention was to curtsy, an operation that, hampered by those trailing yards of clinging khaki, might prove – so it flashed upon the Professor – not only difficult but dangerous.

"Allow me," said the Professor.

His idea was to help Malvina out of Commander Raffleton's coat, and Malvina was preparing to assist him. Commander Raffleton was only just in time.

"I don't think," said Commander Raffleton. "If you don't mind I think we'd better leave that for Mrs. Muldoon."

The Professor let go the coat. Malvina appeared a shade disappointed. One opines that not unreasonably she may have thought to make a better impression without it. But a smiling acquiescence in all arrangements made for her welfare seems to have been one of her charms.

"Perhaps," suggested Commander Raffleton to Malvina while refastening a few of the more important buttons, "if you wouldn't mind explaining yourself to my Cousin Christopher just exactly who and what you are – you'd do it so much better than I should." (What Commander Raffleton

was saying to himself was: "If I tell the dear old Johnny, he'll think I'm pulling his leg. It will sound altogether different the way she will put it.") "You're sure you don't mind?"

Malvina hadn't the slightest objection. She accomplished her curtsy – or rather it looked as if the coat were curtsying – quite gracefully, and with a dignity one would not have expected from it.

"I am the fairy Malvina," she explained to the Professor. "You may have heard of me. I was the favourite of Harbundia, Queen of the White Ladies of Brittany. But that was long ago."

The friendly magician was staring at her with a pair of round eyes that in spite of their amazement looked kindly and understanding. They probably encouraged Malvina to complete the confession of her sad brief history.

"It was when King Heremon ruled over Ireland," she continued. "I did a very foolish and a wicked thing, and was punished for it by being cast out from the companionship of my fellows. Since then" – the coat made the slightest of pathetic gestures – "I have wandered alone."

It ought to have sounded so ridiculous to them both; told on English soil in the year One Thousand Nine Hundred and Fourteen to a smart young officer of Engineers and an elderly Oxford Professor. Across the road the doctor's odd man was opening garage doors; a noisy milk cart was clattering through the village a little late for the London train; a faint odour of eggs and bacon came wafted through the garden, mingled with the scent of lavender and pinks. For Commander Raffleton, maybe, there was excuse. This story, so far as it has gone, has tried to make that clear. But the Professor! He ought to have exploded in a burst of Homeric laughter, or else to have shaken his head at her and warned her where little girls go to who do this sort of thing.

Instead of which he stared from Commander Raffleton to Malvina, and from Malvina back to Commander Raffleton with eyes so astonishingly round that they might have been drawn with a compass.

"God bless my soul!" said the Professor. "But this is most extraordinary!"

"Was there a King Heremon of Ireland?" asked Commander Raffleton. The Professor was a well-known authority on these matters.

"Of course there was a King Heremon of Ireland," answered the Professor quite petulantly – as if the Commander had wanted to know if there had ever been a Julius Caesar or a Napoleon. "And so there was a Queen Harbundia. Malvina is always spoken of in connection with her."

"What did she do?" inquired Commander Raffleton. They both of them seemed to be oblivious of Malvina's presence.

"I forget for the moment," confessed the professor. "I must look it up. Something, if I remember rightly, in connection with the daughter of King Dancrat. He founded the Norman dynasty. William the Conqueror and all that lot. Good Lord!"

"Would you mind her staying with you for a time until I can make arrangements," suggested Commander Raffleton. "I'd be awfully obliged if you would."

What the Professor's answer might have been had he been allowed to exercise such stock of wits as he possessed, it is impossible to say. Of course he was interested – excited, if you will. Folklore, legend, tradition; these had been his lifelong hobbies. Apart from anything else, here at least was a kindred spirit. Seemed to know a thing or two. Where had she learned it? Might not there be sources unknown to the Professor?

But to take her in! To establish her in the only spare bedroom. To introduce her – as what? to English village society. To the new people at the Manor House. To the member of Parliament with his innocent young wife who had taken the vicarage for the summer. To Dawson, R.A., and the Calthorpes!

He might, had he thought it worth his while, have found some respectable French family and boarded her out. There was a man he had known for years at Oxford, a cabinetmaker; the wife a most worthy woman. He could have gone over there from time to time, his notebook in his pocket, and have interviewed her.

Left to himself, he might have behaved as a sane and rational citizen; or he might not. There are records favouring the latter possibility. The thing is not certain. But as regards this particular incident in his career he must be held exonerated. The decision was taken out of his hands.

To Malvina, on first landing in England, Commander Raffleton had stated his intention of leaving her temporarily in the care of the wise and learned Christopher. To Malvina, regarding the Commander as a gift from the gods, that had settled the matter. The wise and learned Christopher, of course, knew of this coming. In all probability it was he – under the guidance of the gods – who had arranged the whole sequence of events. There remained only to tender him her gratitude. She did not wait for the Professor's reply. The coat a little hindered her but, on the other hand, added perhaps an appealing touch of its own. Taking the wise and learned Christopher's hand in both her own, she knelt and kissed it.

And in that quaint archaic French of hers, that long study of the Chronicles of Froissart enabled the Professor to understand:

"I thank you," she said, "for your noble courtesy and hospitality."

In some mysterious way the whole affair had suddenly become imbued with the dignity of an historical event. The Professor had the sudden impression – and indeed it never altogether left him so long as Malvina remained – that he was a great and powerful personage. A sister potentate; incidentally – though, of course, in high politics such points are immaterial – the most bewilderingly beautiful being he had ever seen; had graciously consented to become his guest. The Professor, with a bow that might have been acquired at the court of King Rene, expressed his sense of the honour done to him. What else could a self-respecting potentate do? The incident was closed.

Flight Commander Raffleton seems to have done nothing in the direction of re-opening it. On the contrary, he appears to have used this precise moment for explaining to the Professor how absolutely necessary it was that he should depart for Farnborough without another moment's loss of time. Commander Raffleton added that he would "look them both up again" the first afternoon he could get away; and was sure that if the Professor would get Malvina to speak slowly, he would soon find her French easy to understand.

It did occur to the Professor to ask Commander Raffleton where he had found Malvina – that is, if he remembered. Also what he was going to do about her – that is, if he happened to know. Commander Raffleton, regretting his great need of haste, explained that he had found Malvina asleep beside a menhir not far from Huelgoat, in Brittany, and was afraid that he had woke her up. For further particulars, would the Professor kindly apply to Malvina? For himself, he would never, he felt sure, be able to thank the professor sufficiently.

In conclusion, and without giving further opportunity for discussion, the Commander seems to have shaken his Cousin Christopher by the hand with much enthusiasm; and then to have turned to Malvina. She did not move, but her eyes were fixed on him. And he came to her slowly. And without a word he kissed her full upon the lips.

"That is twice you have kissed me," said Malvina – and a curious little smile played round her mouth. "The third time I shall become a woman."

IV. HOW IT WAS KEPT FROM MRS. ARLINGTON

What surprised the Professor himself, when he came to think of it, was that, left alone with Malvina, and in spite of all the circumstances, he felt neither embarrassment nor perplexity. It was as if, so far as they two were concerned, the whole thing was quite simple – almost humorous. It would be the other people who would have to worry.

The little serving maid was hovering about the garden. She was evidently curious and trying to get a peep. Mrs. Muldoon's voice could be heard calling to her from the kitchen. There was this question of clothes.

"You haven't brought anything with you?" asked the Professor. "I mean, in the way of a frock of any sort."

Malvina, with a smile, gave a little gesture. It implied that all there was of her and hers stood before him.

"We shall have to find you something," said the Professor. "Something in which you can go about –"

The Professor had intended to say "our world," but hesitated, not feeling positive at the moment to which he himself belonged; Malvina's or Mrs. Muldoon's. So he made it "the" world instead. Another gesture conveyed to him that Malvina was entirely in his hands.

"What really have you got on?" asked the Professor. "I mean underneath. Is it anything possible – for a day or two?"

Now Commander Raffleton, for some reason of his own not at all clear to Malvina, had forbidden the taking off of the coat. But had said nothing about undoing it. So by way of response Malvina undid it.

Upon which the Professor, to Malvina's surprise, acted precisely as Commander Raffleton had done. That is to say, he hastily re-closed the coat, returning the buttons to their buttonholes.

The fear may have come to Malvina that she was doomed never to be rid of Commander Raffleton's coat.

"I wonder," mused the Professor, "if anyone in the village –" The little serving maid flittering among the gooseberry bushes – she was pretending to be gathering goose-berries – caught the Professor's eye.

"We will consult my chatelaine, Mrs. Muldoon," suggested the Professor. "I think we shall be able to manage."

The Professor tendered Malvina his arm. With her other hand she gathered up the skirts of the Commander's coat.

"I think," said the Professor with a sudden inspiration as they passed through the garden, "I think I shall explain to Mrs. Muldoon that you have just come straight from a fancy-dress ball."

They found Mrs. Muldoon in the kitchen. A less convincing story than that by which the Professor sought to account to Mrs. Muldoon for the how and the why of Malvina it would be impossible to imagine. Mrs. Muldoon out of sheer kindness appears to have cut him short.

"I'll not be asking ye any questions," said Mrs. Muldoon, "so there'll be no need for ye to imperil your immortal soul. If ye'll just give a thought to your own appearance and leave the colleen to me and Drusilla, we'll make her maybe a bit dacent."

The reference to his own appearance disconcerted the Professor. He had not anticipated, when hastening into his dressing gown and slippers and not bothering about his socks, that he was on his way to meet the chief lady-in-waiting of Queen Harbundia. Demanding that shaving water should be immediately sent up to him, he appears to have retired into the bathroom.

It was while he was shaving that Mrs. Muldoon, knocking at the door, demanded to speak to him. From her tone the Professor came to the conclusion that the house was on fire. He opened the door, and Mrs. Muldoon, seeing he was respectable, slipped in and closed it behind her.

"Where did ye find her? How did she get here?" demanded Mrs. Muldoon. Never before had the Professor seen Mrs. Muldoon other than a placid, good-humoured body. She was trembling from head to foot.

"I told you," explained the Professor. "Young Arthur – "

"I'm not asking ye what ye told me," interrupted Mrs. Muldoon. "I'm asking ye for the truth, if ye know it."

The Professor put a chair for Mrs. Muldoon, and Mrs. Muldoon dropped down upon it.

"What's the matter?" questioned the Professor. "What's happened?"

Mrs. Muldoon glanced round her, and her voice was an hysterical whisper.

"It's no mortal woman ye've brought into the house," said Mrs. Muldoon. "It's a fairy."

Whether up to that moment the Professor had really believed Malvina's story, or whether lurking at the back of his mind there had all along been an innate conviction that the thing was absurd, the Professor himself is now unable to say. To the front of the Professor lay Oxford – political economy, the higher criticism, the rise and progress of rationalism. Behind him, fading away into the dim horizon of humanity, lay an unmapped land where for forty years he had loved to wander; a spirit-haunted land of buried mysteries, lost pathways, leading unto hidden gates of knowledge.

And now upon the trembling balance descended Mrs. Muldoon plump.

"How do you know?" demanded the Professor.

"Shure, don't I know the mark?" replied Mrs. Muldoon almost contemptuously. "Wasn't my own sister's child stolen away the very day of its birth and in its place – "

The little serving maid tapped at the door.

Mademoiselle was "finished." What was to be done with her?

"Don't ask me," protested Mrs. Muldoon, still in a terrified whisper. "I couldn't do it. Not if all the saints were to go down upon their knees and pray to me."

Common-sense argument would not have prevailed with Mrs. Muldoon. The Professor felt that; added to which he had not any handy. He directed, through the door, that "Mademoiselle" should be shown into the dining-room, and listened till Drusilla's footsteps had died away.

"Have you ever heard of the White Ladies?" whispered the Professor to Mrs. Muldoon.

There was not much in the fairy line, one takes it, that Mrs. Muldoon had not heard of and believed. Was the Professor sure?

The Professor gave Mrs. Muldoon his word of honour as a gentleman. The "White Ladies," as Mrs. Muldoon was of course aware, belonged to the "good people." Provided nobody offended her there was nothing to fear.

"Shure, it won't be meself that'll cross her," said Mrs. Muldoon.

"She won't be staying very long," added the Professor. "We will just be nice to her."

"She's got a kind face," admitted Mrs. Muldoon, "and a pleasant way with her." The good body's spirits were perceptibly rising. The favour of a "White Lady" might be worth cultivating.

"We must make a friend of her," urged the Professor, seizing his opportunity.

"And mind," whispered the Professor as he opened the door for Mrs. Muldoon to slip out, "not a word. She doesn't want it known."

One is convinced that Mrs. Muldoon left the bathroom resolved that, so far as she could help it, no breath of suspicion that Malvina was other than what in Drusilla's holiday frock she would appear to be should escape into the village. It was quite a pleasant little frock of a summery character, with short sleeves and loose about the neck, and fitted Malvina, in every sense, much better than the most elaborate confection would have done. The boots were not so successful. Malvina solved the problem by leaving them behind her, together with the stockings, whenever she went out. That she knew this

was wrong is proved by the fact that invariably she tried to hide them. They would be found in the most unlikely places; hidden behind books in the Professor's study, crammed into empty tea canisters in Mrs. Muldoon's storeroom. Mrs. Muldoon was not to be persuaded even to abstract them. The canister with its contents would be placed in silence upon the Professor's table. Malvina on returning would be confronted by a pair of stern, unsympathetic boots. The corners of the fairy mouth would droop in lines suggestive of penitence and contrition.

Had the Professor been firm she would have yielded. But from the black accusing boots the Professor could not keep his eyes from wandering to the guilty white feet, and at once in his heart becoming "counsel for the defence." Must get a pair of sandals next time he went to Oxford. Anyhow, something more dainty than those grim, uncompromising boots.

Besides, it was not often that Malvina ventured beyond the orchard. At least not during the day time – perhaps one ought to say not during that part of the day time when the village was astir. For Malvina appears to have been an early riser. Somewhere about the middle of the night, as any Christian body would have timed it, Mrs. Muldoon – waking and sleeping during this period in a state of high nervous tension – would hear the sound of a softly opened door; peeping from a raised corner of the blind, would catch a glimpse of fluttering garments that seemed to melt into the dawn; would hear coming fainter and fainter from the uplands an unknown song, mingling with the answering voices of the birds.

It was on the uplands between dawn and sunrise that Malvina made the acquaintance of the Arlington twins.

They ought, of course, to have been in bed – all three of them, for the matter of that. The excuse for the twins was their Uncle George. He had been telling them all about the Uffington spectre and Wayland Smith's cave, and had given them "Puck" as a birthday present. They were always given their birthday presents between them, because otherwise they did not care for them. They had retired to their respective bedrooms at ten o'clock and taken it in turns to lie awake. At the first streak of dawn Victoria, who had been watching by her window, woke Victor, as arranged. Victor was for giving it up and going to sleep again, but Victoria reminding him of the "oath," they dressed themselves quite simply, and let themselves down by the ivy.

They came across Malvina close to the tail of the White Horse. They knew she was a fairy the moment they saw her. But they were not frightened – at least not very much. It was Victor who spoke first. Taking off his hat and going down on one knee, he wished Malvina good morning and hoped she was quite well. Malvina, who seemed pleased to see them, made answer, and here it was that Victoria took charge of the affair. The Arlington twins until they were nine had shared a French nurse between them; and then Victor, going to school, had gradually forgotten; while Victoria, remaining at home, had continued her conversations with "madame."

"Oh!" said Victoria. "Then you must be a French fairy."

Now the Professor had impressed upon Malvina that for reasons needless to be explained – anyhow, he never had explained them – she was not to mention that she was a fairy. But he had not told her to deny it. Indeed how could she? The most that could be expected from her was that she should maintain silence on the point. So in answer to Victoria she explained that her name was Malvina, and that she had flown across from Brittany in company with "Sir Arthur," adding that she had often heard of England and had wished to see it.

"How do you like it?" demanded Victoria.

Malvina confessed herself charmed with it. Nowhere had she ever met so many birds. Malvina raised her hand and they all three stood in silence, listening. The sky was ablaze and the air seemed filled with their music. The twins were sure that there were millions of them. They must have come from miles and miles and miles, to sing to Malvina.

Also the people. They were so good and kind and round. Malvina for the present was staying with – accepting the protection, was how she put it, of the wise and learned Christopher. The

"habitation" could be seen from where they stood, its chimneys peeping from among the trees. The twins exchanged a meaning glance. Had they not all along suspected the Professor! His black skull cap, and his big hooked nose, and the yellow-leaved, worm-eaten books – of magic: all doubts were now removed – that for hours he would sit poring over through owlsh gold-rimmed spectacles!

Victor's French was coming back to him. He was anxious to know if Malvina had ever met Sir Launcelot – "to talk to."

A little cloud gathered upon Malvina's face. Yes, she had known them all: King Uthur and Igraine and Sir Ulfias of the Isles. Talked with them, walked with them in the fair lands of France. (It ought to have been England, but Malvina shook her head. Maybe they had travelled.) It was she who had saved Sir Tristram from the wiles of Morgan le Fay. "Though that, of course," explained Malvina, "was never known."

The twins were curious why it should have been "of course," but did not like to interrupt again. There were others before and after. Most of them the twins had never heard of until they came to Charlemagne, beyond which Malvina's reminiscences appeared to fade.

They had all of them been very courteous to her, and some of them indeed quite charming. But...

One gathers they had never been to Malvina more than mere acquaintances, such as one passes the time with while waiting – and longing.

"But you liked Sir Launcelot," urged Victor. He was wishful that Malvina should admire Sir Launcelot, feeling how much there was in common between that early lamented knight and himself. That little affair with Sir Bedivere. It was just how he would have behaved himself.

Ah! yes, admitted Malvina. She had "liked" him. He was always so – so "excellent."

"But he was not – none of them were my own people, my own dear companions." The little cloud had settled down again.

It was Bruno who recalled the three of them to the period of contemporary history.

Polley the cowman's first duty in the morning was to let Bruno loose for a run. He arrived panting and breathless, and evidently offended at not having been included in the escapade. He could have given them both away quite easily if he had not been the most forgiving of black-and-tan collies. As it was, he had been worrying himself crazy for the last half-hour, feeling sure they had forgotten the time. "Don't you know it's nearly six o'clock? That in less than half an hour Jane will be knocking at your doors with glasses of hot milk, and will probably drop them and scream when she finds your beds empty and the window wide open." That is what he had intended should be his first words, but on scenting Malvina they went from him entirely. He gave her one look and flopped down flat, wriggling towards her, whining and wagging his tail at the same time. Malvina acknowledged his homage by laughing and patting his head with her foot, and that sent him into the seventh heaven of delight. They all four descended the hill together and parted at the orchard gate. The twins expressed a polite but quite sincere hope that they would have the pleasure of seeing Malvina again; but Malvina, seized maybe with sudden doubts as to whether she had behaved with discretion, appears to have replied evasively. Ten minutes later she was lying asleep, the golden head pillowed on the round white arm; as Mrs. Muldoon on her way down to the kitchen saw for herself. And the twins, fortunate enough to find a side door open, slipped into the house unnoticed and scrambled back into their beds.

It was quarter past nine when Mrs. Arlington came in herself and woke them up. She was short-tempered with them both and had evidently been crying. They had their breakfast in the kitchen.

During lunch hardly a word was spoken. And there was no pudding. Mr. Arlington, a stout, florid gentleman, had no time for pudding. The rest might sit and enjoy it at their leisure, but not so Mr. Arlington. Somebody had to see to things – that is, if they were not to be allowed to go to rack and ruin. If other people could not be relied upon to do their duty, so that everything inside the house and out of it was thrown upon one pair of shoulders, then it followed as a natural consequence that that pair of shoulders could not spare the necessary time to properly finish its meals. This it was

that was at the root of the decay of English farming. When farmers' wives, to say nothing of sons and daughters old enough one might imagine to be anxious to do something in repayment for the money and care lavished upon them, had all put their shoulders to the wheel, then English farming had prospered. When, on the other hand, other people shirked their fair share of labour and responsibility, leaving to one pair of hands...

It was the eldest Arlington girl's quite audible remark that pa could have eaten two helpings of pudding while he had been talking, that caused Mr. Arlington to lose the thread of his discourse. To put it quite bluntly, what Mr. Arlington meant to say was this: He had never wanted to be a farmer – at least not in the beginning. Other men in his position, having acquired competency by years of self-sacrificing labour, would have retired to a well-earned leisure. Having yielded to persuasion and taken on the job, he was going to see it through; and everybody else was going to do their share or there would be trouble.

Mr. Arlington, swallowing the remains of his glass in a single gulp, spoilt a dignified exit by violently hiccoughing, and Mrs. Arlington rang the bell furiously for the parlourmaid to clear away. The pudding passed untouched from before the very eyes of the twins. It was a black-currant pudding with brown sugar.

That night Mrs. Arlington appears to have confided in the twins, partly for her own relief and partly for their moral benefit. If Mrs. Arlington had enjoyed the blessing in disguise of a less indulgent mother, all might have been well. By nature Mrs. Arlington had been endowed with an active and energetic temperament. "Miss Can't-sit-still-a-minute," her nurse had always called her. Unfortunately it had been allowed to sink into disuse; was now in all probability beyond hope of recovery. Their father was quite right. When they had lived in Bayswater and the business was in Mincing Lane it did not matter. Now it was different. A farmer's wife ought to be up at six; she ought to see that everybody else was up at six; servants looked after, kept up to the mark; children encouraged by their mother's example. Organisation. That was what was wanted. The day mapped out; to every hour its appointed task. Then, instead of the morning being gone before you could turn yourself round, and confusion made worse confounded by your leaving off what you were doing and trying to do six things at once that you couldn't remember whether you had done or whether you hadn't...

Here Mrs. Arlington appears to have dissolved into tears. Generally speaking, she was a placid, smiling, most amiable lady, quite delightful to have about the house provided all you demanded of her were pleasant looks and a sunny disposition. The twins appear to have joined their tears to hers. Tucked in and left to themselves, one imagines the problem being discussed with grave seriousness, much whispered conversation, then slept upon, the morning bringing with it ideas. The result being that the next evening, between high tea and supper, Mrs. Muldoon, answering herself the knock at the door, found twin figures standing hand in hand on the Professor's step.

They asked her if "the Fairy" was in.

V. HOW IT WAS TOLD TO MRS. MARIGOLD

There was no need of the proverbial feather. Mrs. Muldoon made a grab at the settle but missed it. She caught at a chair, but that gave way. It was the floor that finally stopped her.

"We're so sorry," apologised Victor. "We thought you knew. We ought to have said Mademoiselle Malvina."

Mrs. Muldoon regained her feet, and without answering walked straight into the study.

"They want to know," said Mrs. Muldoon, "if the Fairy's in." The Professor, with his back to the window, was reading. The light in the room was somewhat faint.

"Who wants to know?" demanded the Professor.

"The twins from the Manor House," explained Mrs. Muldoon.

"But what? – but who?" began the Professor.

"Shall I say 'not at home'?" suggested Mrs. Muldoon. "Or hadn't you better see them yourself."

"Show them in," directed the Professor.

They came in, looking a little scared and still holding one another by the hand. They wished the Professor good evening, and when he rose they backed away from him. The Professor shook hands with them, but they did not let go, so that Victoria gave him her right hand and Victor his left, and then at the Professor's invitation they sat themselves down on the extreme edge of the sofa.

"I hope we do not disturb you," said Victor. "We wanted to see Mademoiselle Malvina."

"Why do you want to see Mademoiselle Malvina?" inquired the Professor.

"It is something very private," said Victor.

"We wanted to ask her a great favour," said Victoria.

"I'm sorry," said the Professor, "but she isn't in. At least, I don't think so." (The Professor never was quite sure. "She slips in and out making no more noise than a wind-driven rose leaf," was Mrs. Muldoon's explanation.) "Hadn't you better tell me? Leave me to put it to her."

They looked at one another. It would never do to offend the wise and learned Christopher. Besides, a magician, it is to be assumed, has more ways than one of learning what people are thinking.

"It is about mamma," explained Victoria. "We wondered if Malvina would mind changing her."

The Professor had been reading up Malvina. It flashed across him that this had always been her speciality: Changing people. How had the Arlington twins discovered it? And why did they want their mother changed? And what did they want her changed into? It was shocking when you come to think of it! The Professor became suddenly so stern, that if the twins could have seen his expression – which, owing to the fading light, they couldn't – they would have been too frightened to answer.

"Why do you want your mother changed?" demanded the Professor. Even as it was his voice alarmed them.

"It's for her own good," faltered Victoria.

"Of course we don't mean into anything," explained Victor.

"Only her inside," added Victoria.

"We thought that Malvina might be able to improve her," completed Victor.

It was still very disgraceful. What were we coming to when children went about clamouring for their mothers to be "improved"! The atmosphere was charged with indignation. The twins felt it.

"She wants to be," persisted Victoria. "She wants to be energetic and to get up early in the morning and do things."

"You see," added Victor, "she was never properly brought up."

The Professor maintains stoutly that his only intention was a joke. It was not even as if anything objectionable had been suggested. The Professor himself had on occasions been made the confidant of both.

"Best woman that ever lived, if only one could graft a little energy upon her. No sense of time. Too easy-going. No idea of keeping people up to the mark." So Mr. Arlington, over the nuts and wine.

"It's pure laziness. Oh, yes, it is. My friends say I'm so 'restful'; but that's the proper explanation of it – born laziness. And yet I try. You have no idea, Professor Littlecherry, how much I try." So Mrs. Arlington, laughingly, while admiring the Professor's roses.

Besides, how absurd to believe that Malvina could possibly change anybody! Way back, when the human brain was yet in process of evolution, such things may have been possible. Hypnotic suggestion, mesmeric influence, dormant brain cells quickened into activity by magnetic vibration. All that had been lost. These were the days of George the Fifth, not of King Heremon. What the Professor was really after was: How would Malvina receive the proposal? Of course she would try to get out of it. A dear little thing. But could any sane man, professor of mathematics...

Malvina was standing beside him. No one had remarked her entrance. The eyes of the twins had been glued upon the wise and learned Christopher. The Professor, when he was thinking, never saw anything. Still, it was rather startling.

"We should never change what the good God has once fashioned," said Malvina. She spoke very gravely. The childishness seemed to have fallen from her.

"You didn't always think so," said the Professor. It nettled the Professor that all idea of this being a good joke had departed with the sound of Malvina's voice. She had that way with her.

She made a little gesture. It conveyed to the Professor that his remark had not been altogether in good taste.

"I speak as one who has learned," said Malvina.

"I beg your pardon," said the Professor. "I ought not to have said that."

Malvina accepted the Professor's apology with a bow.

"But this is something very different," continued the Professor. Quite another interest had taken hold of the Professor. It was easy enough to summon Dame Commonsense to one's aid when Malvina was not present. Before those strange eyes the good lady had a habit of sneaking away. Suppose – of course the idea was ridiculous, but suppose – something did happen! As a psychological experiment was not one justified? What was the beginning of all science but applied curiosity? Malvina might be able – and willing – to explain how it was done. That is, if anything did happen, which, of course, it wouldn't, and so much the better. This thing had got to be ended.

"It would be using a gift not for one's own purposes, but to help others," urged the Professor.

"You see," urged Victor, "mamma really wants to be changed."

"And papa wants it too," urged Victoria.

"It seems to me, if I may so express it," added the Professor, "that really it would be in the nature of making amends for – well, for – for our youthful follies," concluded the Professor a little nervously.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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