Harraden Beatrice

A Bird of Passage and Other Stories

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http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23147131
A Bird of Passage and Other Stories:
ISBN http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/44322

Содержание

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A BIRD OF PASSAGE

It was about four in the afternoon when a young girl came into the salon of the little hotel at C. in Switzerland, and drew her chair up to the fire.

"You are soaked through," said an elderly lady, who was herself trying to get roasted. "You ought to lose no time in changing your clothes."

"I have not anything to change," said the young girl, laughing. "Oh, I shall soon be dry."

"Have you lost all your luggage?" asked the lady sympathetically.

"No," said the young girl, "I had none to lose." And she smiled a little mischievously, as though she knew by instinct that her companion's sympathy would at once degenerate into suspicion!

"I don't mean to say that I have not a knapsack," she added considerately. "I have walked a long distance-in fact from *Z*."

"And where did you leave your companions?" asked the lady, with a touch of forgiveness in her voice.

"I am without companions, just as I am without luggage," laughed the girl.

And then she opened the piano, and struck a few notes. There was something caressing in the way in which she touched the keys; whoever she was, she knew how to make sweet music; sad music too, full of that undefinable longing, like the holding out of one's arms to one's friends in the hopeless distance.

The lady bending over the fire looked up at the little girl, and forgot that she had brought neither friends nor luggage with her. She hesitated for one moment, and then she took the childish face between her hands and kissed it.

"Thank you, dear, for your music," she said gently.

"The piano is terribly out of tune," said the little girl suddenly, and she ran out of the room and came back carrying her knapsack.

"What are you going to do?" asked her companion.

"I am going to tune the piano," the little girl said; and she took a tuning-hammer out of her knapsack, and began her work in real earnest. She evidently knew what she was about, and pegged away at the notes as though her whole life depended on the result.

The lady by the fire was lost in amazement. Who could she be? Without luggage and without friends, and with a tuning hammer!

Meanwhile one of the gentlemen had strolled into the salon; but hearing the sound of tuning, and being in secret possession of nerves, he fled, saying, "The tuner, by Jove!"

A few minutes afterwards, Miss Blake, whose nerves were

no secret possession, hastened into the salon, and in her usual imperious fashion demanded silence.

"I have just done," said the little girl. "The piano was so terribly out of tune, I could not resist the temptation."

Miss Blake, who never listened to what any one said, took it for granted that the little girl was the tuner for whom M. le Proprietaire had promised to send; and having bestowed upon her a condescending nod, passed out into the garden, where she told some of the visitors that the piano had been tuned at last, and that the tuner was a young woman of rather eccentric appearance.

"Really it is quite abominable how women thrust themselves into every profession," she remarked in her masculine voice. "It is so unfeminine, so unseemly."

There was nothing of the feminine about Miss Blake: her horse-cloth dress, her waistcoat and high collar, and her billy-cock hat were of the masculine genus; even her nerves could not be called feminine, since we learn from two or three doctors (taken off their guard) that nerves are neither feminine nor masculine, but common.

"I should like to see this tuner," said one of the tennis players, leaning against a tree.

"Here she comes," said Miss Blake, as the little girl was seen sauntering, into the garden.

The men put up their eye-glasses, and saw a little lady with a childish face and soft brown hair, of strictly feminine appearance and bearing. The goat came toward her and began nibbling at

her frock. She seemed to understand the manner of goats, and played with him to his heart's content. One of the tennis players, Oswald Everard by name, strolled down to the bank where she was having her frolic.

"Good afternoon," he said, raising his cap. "I hope the goat is not worrying you. Poor little fellow! This is his last day of play. He is to be killed to-morrow for table d'hôte."

"What a shame!" she said. "Fancy to be killed, and then grumbled at!"

"That is precisely what we do here," he said, laughing. "We grumble at everything we eat. And I own to being one of the grumpiest; though the lady in the horse-cloth dress yonder follows close upon my heels."

"She was the lady who was annoyed at me because I tuned the piano," the little girl said. "Still it had to be done. It was plainly my duty. I seemed to have come for that purpose."

"It has been confoundedly annoying having it out of tune," he said. "I've had to give up singing altogether. But what a strange profession you have chosen! Very unusual, isn't it?"

"Why, surely not," she answered, amused. "It seems to me that every other woman has taken to it. The wonder to me is that any one ever scores a success. Nowadays, however, no one could amass a huge fortune out of it."

"No one, indeed!" replied Oswald Everard, laughing. "What on earth made you take to it?"

"It took to me," she said simply. "It wrapt me round with

enthusiasm. I could think of nothing else. I vowed that I would rise to the top of my profession. I worked day and night. But it means incessant toil for years if one wants to make any headway."

"Good gracious! I thought it was merely a matter of a few months," he said, smiling at the little girl.

"A few months!" she repeated scornfully. "You are speaking the language of an amateur. No; one has to work faithfully year after year, to grasp the possibilities and pass on to greater possibilities. You imagine what it must feel like to touch the notes, and know that you are keeping the listeners spellbound; that you are taking them into a fairyland of sound, where petty personality is lost in vague longing and regret."

"I confess that I had not thought of it in that way," he said humbly. "I have only regarded it as a necessary everyday evil; and to be quite honest with you, I fail to see now how it can inspire enthusiasm. I wish I could see," he added, looking up at the engaging little figure before him.

"Never mind," she said, laughing at his distress; "I forgive you. And after all, you are not the only person who looks upon it as a necessary evil. My poor guardian abominated it. He made many sacrifices to come and listen to me. He knew I liked to see his kind old face, and that the presence of a real friend inspired me with confidence."

"I should not have thought it was nervous work," he said.

"Try it and see," she answered. "But surely you spoke of singing. Are you not nervous when you sing?"

"Sometimes," he replied, rather stiffly. "But that is slightly different." (He was very proud of his singing, and made a great fuss about it.) "Your profession, as I remarked before, is an unavoidable nuisance. When I think what I have suffered from the gentlemen of your profession, I only wonder that I have any brains left. But I am uncourteous."

"No, no," she said. "Let me hear about your sufferings."

"Whenever I have specially wanted to be quiet," he said; and then he glanced at her childish little face, and he hesitated. "It seems so rude of me," he added. He was the soul of courtesy, although he was an amateur tenor singer.

"Please tell me," the little girl said, in her winning way.

"Well," he said, gathering himself together, "it is the one subject on which I can be eloquent. Ever since I can remember I have been worried and tortured by those rascals. I have tried in every way to escape from them, but there is no hope for me. Yes; I believe that all the tuners in the universe are in league against me, and have marked me out for their special prey."

"*All the what?*" asked the little girl, with a jerk in her voice.

"All the tuners, of course," he replied, rather snappishly. "I know that we cannot do without them; but, good heavens! they have no tact, no consideration, no mercy. Whenever I've wanted to write or read quietly that fatal knock has come at the door, and I've known by instinct that all chance of peace was over. Whenever I've been giving a luncheon party, the tuner has arrived, with his abominable black bag, and his abominable

card, which has to be signed at once. On one occasion I was just proposing to a girl in her father's library, when the tuner struck up in the drawing-room. I left off suddenly, and fled from the house. But there is no escape from these fiends; I believe they are swarming about in the air like so many bacteria. And how, in the name of goodness, you should deliberately choose to be one of them, and should be so enthusiastic over your work, puzzles me beyond all words. Don't say that you carry a black bag, and present cards that have to be filled up at the most inconvenient time; don't-"

He stopped suddenly, for the little girl was convulsed with laughter. She laughed until the tears rolled down her cheeks; and then she dried her eyes and laughed again.

"Excuse me," she said, "I can't help myself; it's so funny."

"It may be funny to you," he said, laughing in spite of himself; "but it is not funny to me."

"Of course it isn't," she replied, making a desperate effort to be serious. "Well, tell me something more about these tuners."

"Not another word," he said gallantly. "I am ashamed of myself as it is. Come to the end of the garden, and let me show you the view down into the valley."

She had conquered her fit of merriment, but her face wore a settled look of mischief, and she was evidently the possessor of some secret joke. She seemed in capital health and spirits, and had so much to say that was bright and interesting, that Oswald Everard found himself becoming reconciled to the whole race of

tuners. He was amazed to learn that she had walked all the way from *Z*, and quite alone too.

"Oh, I don't think anything of that," she said; "I had a splendid time, and I caught four rare butterflies. I would not have missed those for anything. As for the going about by myself, that is a second nature. Besides, I do not belong to any one. That has its advantages, and I suppose its disadvantages; but at present I have only discovered the advantages. The disadvantages will discover themselves!"

"I believe you are what the novels call an advanced young woman," he said. "Perhaps you give lectures on Woman's Suffrage or something of that sort."

"I have very often mounted the platform," she answered. "In fact, I am never so happy as when addressing an immense audience. A most unfeminine thing to do, isn't it? What would the lady yonder in the horse-cloth dress and billy-cock hat say? Don't you think you ought to go and help her drive away the goat? She looks so frightened. She interests me deeply. I wonder whether she has written an essay on the Feminine in Woman. I should like to read it; it would do me so much good."

"You are at least a true woman," he said, laughing, "for I see you can be spiteful. The tuning has not driven that away."

"Ah, I had forgotten about the tuning," she answered brightly; "but now you remind me, I have been seized with a great idea."

"Won't you tell it to me?" he asked.

"No," she answered. "I keep my great ideas for myself, and

work them out in secret. And this one is particularly amusing. What fun I shall have!"

"But why keep the fun to yourself?" he said. "We all want to be amused here; we all want to be stirred up; a little fun would be a charity."

"Very well, since you wish it, but you must give me time to work out my great idea. I do not hurry about things, not even about my professional duties. For I have a strong feeling that it is vulgar to be always amassing riches! As I have neither a husband nor a brother to support, I have chosen less wealth, and more leisure to enjoy all the loveliness of life! So you see I take my time about everything. And to-morrow I shall catch butterflies at my leisure, and lie among the dear old pines, and work at my great idea."

"I shall catch butterflies," said her companion. "And I too shall lie among the dear old pines."

"Just as you please," she said; and at that moment the table d'hôte bell rang.

The little girl hastened to the bureau and spoke rapidly in German to the cashier.

"Ach, Fräulein!" he said. "You are not really serious?"

"Yes, I am," she said. "I don't want them to know my name. It will only worry me. Say I am the young lady who tuned the piano."

She had scarcely given these directions and mounted to her room, when Oswald Everard, who was much interested in

his mysterious companion, came to the bureau and asked for the name of the little lady. "Es ist das Fräulein welches das Piano gestimmt hat," answered the man, returning with unusual quickness to his account-book.

No one spoke to the little girl at table d'hôte; but for all that she enjoyed her dinner, and gave her serious attention to all the courses. Being thus solidly occupied, she had not much leisure to bestow on the conversation of the other guests. Nor was it specially original: it treated of the shortcomings of the chef, the tastelessness of the soup, the toughness of the beef, and all the many failings which go to complete a mountain-hotel dinner. But suddenly, so it seemed to the little girl, this time-honored talk passed into another phase; she heard the word music mentioned, and she became at once interested to learn what these people had to say on a subject which was dearer to her than any other.

"For my own part," said a stern-looking old man, "I have no words to describe what a gracious comfort music has been to me all my life. It is the noblest language which man may understand and speak. And I sometimes think that those who know it, or know something of it, are able at rare moments to find an answer to life's perplexing problems."

The little girl looked up from her plate. Robert Browning's words rose to her lips, but she did not give them utterance:

> "God has a few of us whom he whispers in the ear;
> The rest may reason, and welcome; 'tis we musicians know."

"I have lived through a long life," said another elderly man, "and have therefore had my share of trouble, but the grief of being obliged to give up music was the grief which held me longest, or which perhaps has never left me. I still crave for the gracious pleasure of touching once more the strings of a violoncello, and hearing the dear tender voice singing and throbbing and answering even to such poor skill as mine. I still yearn to take my part in concerted music, and be one of those privileged to play Beethoven's string quartettes. But that will have to be in another incarnation, I think."

He glanced at his shrunken arm, and then, as though ashamed of this allusion to his own personal infirmity, he added hastily:

"But when the first pang of such a pain is over, there remains the comfort of being a listener. At first one does not think it a comfort; but as time goes on, there is no resisting its magic influence. And Lowell said rightly that 'one of God's great charities is music.'"

"I did not know you were musical, Mr. Keith," said an English lady. "You have never before spoken of music."

"Perhaps not, madam," he answered. "One does not often speak of what one cares for most of all. But when I am in London I rarely miss hearing our best players."

At this point others joined in, and the various merits of eminent pianists were warmly discussed.

"What a wonderful name that little English lady has made for

herself!" said the Major, who was considered an authority on all subjects. "I would go anywhere to hear Miss Thyra Flowerdew. We all ought to be very proud of her. She has taken even the German musical world by storm, and they say her recitals at Paris have been brilliantly successful. I myself have heard her at New York, Leipsic, London, Berlin, and even Chicago."

The little girl stirred uneasily in her chair.

"I don't think Miss Flowerdew has ever been to Chicago," she said.

There was a dead silence. The admirer of Miss Thyra Flowerdew looked much annoyed, and twiddled his watch chain. He had meant to say Philadelphia, but he did not think it necessary to own to his mistake.

"What impertinence!" said one of the ladies to Miss Blake. "What can she know about it? Is she not the young person who tuned the piano?"

"Perhaps she tunes Miss Thyra Flowerdew's piano!" suggested Miss Blake in a loud whisper.

"You are right, madam," said the little girl quietly. "I have often tuned Miss Flowerdew's piano."

There was another embarrassing silence, and then a lovely old lady, whom every one reverenced, came to the rescue.

"I think her playing is simply superb," she said. "Nothing that I ever hear satisfies me so entirely. She has all the tenderness of an angel's touch."

"Listening to her," said the Major, who had now recovered

from his annoyance at being interrupted, "one becomes unconscious of her presence, for she *is the music itself*. And that is rare. It is but seldom nowadays that we are allowed to forget the personality of the player. And yet her personality is an unusual one; having once seen her, it would not be easy to forget her. I should recognize her anywhere."

As he spoke he glanced at the little tuner, and could not help admiring her dignified composure under circumstances which might have been distressing to any one; and when she rose with the others, he followed her, and said stiffly:

"I regret that I was the indirect cause of putting you in an awkward position."

"It is really of no consequence," she said brightly. "If you think I was impertinent, I ask your forgiveness. I did not mean to be officious. The words were spoken before I was aware of them."

She passed into the salon, where she found a quiet corner for herself, and read some of the newspapers. No one took the slightest notice of her; not a word was spoken to her; but when she relieved the company of her presence her impertinence was commented on.

"I am sorry that she heard what I said," remarked Miss Blake. "But she did not seem to mind. These young women who go out into the world lose the edge of their sensitiveness and femininity. I have always observed that."

"How much they are spared then!" answered some one.

Meanwhile the little girl slept soundly. She had merry dreams,

and finally woke up laughing. She hurried over her breakfast, and then stood ready to go for a butterfly hunt. She looked thoroughly happy, and evidently had found, and was holding tightly the key to life's enjoyment.

Oswald Everard was waiting on the balcony, and he reminded her that he intended to go with her.

"Come along, then," she answered; "we must not lose a moment."

They caught butterflies, they picked flowers, they ran; they lingered by the wayside, they sang; they climbed, and he marveled at her easy speed. Nothing seemed to tire her, and everything seemed to delight her: the flowers, the birds, the clouds, the grasses, and the fragrance of the pine-woods.

"Is it not good to live?" she cried, "Is it not splendid to take in the scented air? Draw in as many long breaths as you can. Isn't it good? Don't you feel now as though you were ready to move mountains? I do. What a dear old nurse Nature is! How she pets us, and gives us the best of her treasures!"

Her happiness invaded Oswald Everard's soul, and he felt like a schoolboy once more, rejoicing in a fine day and his liberty; with nothing to spoil the freshness of the air, and nothing to threaten the freedom of the moment.

"Is it not good to live?" he cried. "Yes, indeed it is, if we know how to enjoy."

They had come upon some haymakers, and the little girl hastened up to help them. There she was in the midst of them,

laughing and talking to the women, and helping them to pile up the hay on the shoulders of a broad-backed man, who then conveyed his burden to a pear-shaped stack. Oswald Everard watched his companion for a moment, and then, quite forgetting his dignity as an amateur tenor singer, he too, lent his aid, and did not leave off until his companion sank exhausted on the ground.

"Oh," she laughed, "what delightful work for a very short time! Come along; let us go into that brown chalet yonder and ask for some milk. I am simply parched with thirst. Thank you, but I prefer to carry my own flowers."

"What an independent little lady you are!" he said.

"It is quite necessary in our profession, I can assure you," she said, with a tone of mischief in her voice. "That reminds me that my profession is evidently not looked upon with any favor by the visitors at the hotel. I am heartbroken to think that I have not won the esteem of that lady in the billy-cock hat. What will she say to you for coming with me? And what will she say of me for allowing you to come? I wonder whether she will say, 'How unfeminine!' I wish I could hear her!"

"I don't suppose you care," he said. "You seem to be a wild little bird."

"I don't care what a person of that description says," replied his companion.

"What on earth made you contradict the Major at dinner last night?" he asked. "I was not at the table, but some one told me of the incident; and I felt very sorry about it. What could you know

of Miss Thyra Flowerdew?"

"Well, considering that she is in my profession, of course I know something about her," said the little girl.

"Confound it all!" he said, rather rudely. "Surely there is some difference between the bellows-blower and the organist."

"Absolutely none," she answered-"merely a variation of the original theme!"

As she spoke she knocked at the door of the chalet, and asked the old dame to give them some milk. They sat in the *Stube*, and the little girl looked about, and admired the spinning-wheel, and the quaint chairs, and the queer old jugs, and the pictures on the walls.

"Ah, but you shall see the other room," the old peasant woman said, and she led them into a small apartment, which was evidently intended for a study. It bore evidences of unusual taste and care, and one could see that some loving hand had been trying to make it a real sanctum of refinement. There was even a small piano. A carved book-rack was fastened to the wall.

The old dame did not speak at first; she gave her guests time to recover from the astonishment which she felt they must be experiencing; then she pointed proudly to the piano.

"I bought that for my daughters," she said, with a strange mixture of sadness and triumph. "I wanted to keep them at home with me, and I saved and saved and got enough money to buy the piano. They had always wanted to have one, and I thought they would then stay with me. They liked music and books, and I

knew they would be glad to have a room of their own where they might read and play and study; and so I gave them this corner."

"Well, mother," asked the little girl, "and where are they this afternoon?"

"Ah!" she answered sadly, "they did not care to stay. But it was natural enough; and I was foolish to grieve. Besides, they come to see me."

"And then they play to you?" asked the little girl gently.

"They say the piano is out of tune," the old dame said "I don't know. Perhaps you can tell."

The little girl sat down to the piano, and struck a few chords.

"Yes," she said. "It is badly out of tune. Give me the tuning-hammer. I am sorry," she added, smiling at Oswald Everard, "but I cannot neglect my duty. Don't wait for me."

"I will wait for you," he said sullenly; and he went into the balcony and smoked his pipe, and tried to possess his soul in patience.

When she had faithfully done her work, she played a few simple melodies, such as she knew the old woman would love and understand; and she turned away when she saw that the listener's eyes were moist.

"Play once again," the old woman whispered. "I am dreaming of beautiful things."

So the little tuner touched the keys again with all the tenderness of an angel.

"Tell your daughters," she said, as she rose to say good-bye,

"that the piano is now in good tune. Then they will play to you the next time they come."

"I shall always remember you, mademoiselle," the old woman said; and, almost unconsciously, she too took the childish face and kissed it.

Oswald Everard was waiting in the hayfield for his companion; and when she apologized to him for this little professional intermezzo, as she called it, he recovered from his sulkiness and readjusted his nerves, which the noise of the tuning had somewhat disturbed.

"It was very good of you to tune the old dame's piano," he said, looking at her with renewed interest.

"Some one had to do it, of course," she answered brightly, "and I am glad the chance fell to me. What a comfort it is to think that the next time those daughters come to see her, they will play to her, and make her very happy! Poor old dear!"

"You puzzle me greatly," he said. "I cannot for the life of me think what made you choose your calling. You must have many gifts; any one who talks with you must see that at once. And you play quite nicely too."

"I am sorry that my profession sticks in your throat," she answered. "Do be thankful that I am nothing worse than a tuner. For I might be something worse-a snob, for instance."

And so speaking, she dashed after a butterfly, and left him to recover from her words. He was conscious of having deserved a reproof; and when at last he overtook her, he said as much, and

asked for her kind indulgence.

"I forgive you," she said, laughing. "You and I are not looking at things from the same point of view; but we have had a splendid morning together, and I have enjoyed every minute of it. And to-morrow I go on my way."

"And to-morrow you go!" he repeated. "Can it not be the day after to-morrow?"

"I am a bird of passage," she said, shaking her head. "You must not seek to detain me. I have taken my rest, and off I go to other climes."

They had arrived at the hotel, and Oswald Everard saw no more of his companion until the evening, when she came down rather late for table d'hôte. She hurried over her dinner and went into the salon. She closed the door and sat down to the piano, and lingered there without touching the keys; once or twice she raised her hands, and then she let them rest on the notes, and half-unconsciously they began to move and make sweet music, and then they drifted into Schumann's *Abendlied*, and then the little girl played some of his *Kinderscenen*, and some of his *Fantasie Stucke*, and some of his songs.

Her touch and feeling were exquisite; and her phrasing betrayed the true musician. The strains of music reached the dining-room, and one by one the guests came creeping in, moved by the music, and anxious to see the musician.

The little girl did not look up; she was in a Schumann mood that evening, and only the players of Schumann know what

enthralling possession he takes of their very spirit. All the passion and pathos and wildness and longing had found an inspired interpreter; and those who listened to her were held by the magic which was her own secret, and which had won for her such honor as comes only to the few. She understood Schumann's music, and was at her best with him.

Had she, perhaps, chosen to play his music this evening because she wished to be at her best? Or was she merely being impelled by an overwhelming force within her? Perhaps it was something of both.

Was she wishing to humiliate these people who had received her so coldly? This little girl was only human: perhaps there was something of that feeling too. Who can tell? But she played as she had never played in London, or Paris, or Berlin, or New York, or Philadelphia.

At last she arrived at the Carneval, and those who heard her declared afterward that they had never listened to a more magnificent rendering; the tenderness was so restrained, the vigor was so refined. When the last notes of that spirited *Marche des Davidsbundler contre les Philistins* had died away, she glanced at Oswald Everard, who was standing near her, almost dazed.

"And now my favorite piece of all," she said; and she at once began the Second Novellette, the finest of the eight, but seldom played in public.

What can one say of the wild rush of the leading theme, and the pathetic longing of the Intermezzo?

"… The murmuring dying notes,
That fall as soft as snow on the sea;"

and

"The passionate strain that deeply going,
Refines the bosom it trembles through."

What can one say of those vague aspirations and finest thoughts which possess the very dullest among us when such music as that which the little girl had chosen catches us and keeps us, if only for a passing moment, but that moment of the rarest worth and loveliness in our unlovely lives?

What can one say of the highest music, except that, like death, it is the great leveler: it gathers us all to its tender keeping-and we rest.

The little girl ceased playing. There was not a sound to be heard; the magic was still holding her listeners. When at last they had freed themselves with a sigh, they pressed forward to greet her.

"There is only one person who can play like that," cried the Major, with sudden inspiration; "she is Miss Thyra Flowerdew."

The little girl smiled.

"That is my name," she said simply; and she slipped out of the room.

The next morning, at an early hour, the Bird of Passage took

her flight onward, but she was not destined to go off unobserved. Oswald Everard saw the little figure swinging along the road, and he overtook her.

"You little wild bird!" he said. "And so this was your great idea: to have your fun out of us all, and then play to us and make us feel, I don't know how-and then to go."

"You said the company wanted stirring up," she answered; "and I rather fancy I have stirred them up."

"And what do you suppose you have done for me?" he asked.

"I hope I have proved to you that the bellows-blower and the organist are sometimes identical," she answered.

But he shook his head.

"Little wild bird," he said, "you have given me a great idea, and I will tell you what it is: *to tame you*. So good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye," she said. "But wild birds are not so easily tamed."

Then she waved her hand over her head, and went on her way singing.

THE END

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AT THE GREEN DRAGON

CHAPTER I
HIERONYMUS COMES

It was a pouring September evening when a stranger knocked at the door of the Crown Inn. Old Mrs. Howells saw that he carried a portmanteau in his hand.

"If it's a bedroom you want," she said, "I can't be bothered with you. What with brewing the beer and cleaning the brass, I've more than I can manage. I'm that tired!"

"And so am I," said the stranger pathetically.

"Go over the way to the Green Dragon," suggested Mrs. Howells. "Mrs. Benbow may be able to put you up. But what with the brewing and the cleaning, I can't do with you."

The stranger stepped across the road to the Green Dragon. He tapped at the door, and a cheery little woman made her appearance. She was carrying what they call in Shropshire a devil of hot beer. It smelt good.

"Good-evening, ma'am," said the stranger. "Can you house me for the night? The hostess of the Crown Inn has turned me away. But you surely will not do the same? You observe what a bad cold I have."

Mrs. Benbow glanced sharply at the stranger. She had not kept the Green Dragon for ten years without learning to judge somewhat of character; and to-night she was particularly on her guard, for her husband had gone to stay for two days with some relatives in Shrewsbury, so that Mrs. Benbow and old John of the wooden leg, called *Dot and carry one*, were left as sole guardians of the little wayside public house.

"It is not very convenient for me to take you in," she said.

"And it would not be very convenient for me to be shut out," he replied. "Besides which, I have had a whiff of that hot beer."

At that moment a voice from the kitchen cried impatiently. "Here, missus! where be that beer of your'n. I be feeling quite faint-like!"

"As though he could call out like that if he was faint!" laughed Mrs. Benbow, running off into the kitchen.

When she returned she found the stranger seated at the foot of the staircase.

"And what do you propose to do for me?" he asked patiently.

There was no mistaking the genial manner. Mrs. Benbow was conquered.

"I propose to fry some eggs and bacon for your supper," she said cheerily. "And then I propose to make your bedroom ready."

"Sensible woman!" he said, as he followed her into the parlor, where a fire was burning brightly. He threw himself into the easychair, and immediately experienced that sensation of repose and thankfulness which comes over us when we have

found a haven. There he rested, content with himself and his surroundings. The fire lit up his face, and showed him to be a man of about forty years.

There was nothing especially remarkable about him. The face in repose was sad and thoughtful; and yet when he discovered a yellow cat sleeping under the table, he smiled as though some great pleasure had come into his life.

"Come along, little comrade!" he said, as he captured her. She looked up into his face so frankly that the stranger was much impressed. "Why, I do believe you are a dog undergoing a cat incarnation," he continued. "What qualities did you lack when you were a dog, I wonder? Perhaps you did not steal sufficiently well; perhaps you had net cultivated restfulness. And your name? Your name shall be Gamboge. I think that is a suitable appellation for you-certainly more suitable than most of the names thrust upon unoffending humanity. My own name, for instance, Hieronymus! Ah, you may well mew! You are a thoroughly sensible creature."

So he amused himself until Mrs. Benbow came with his supper. Then he pointed to the cat and said quietly:

"That is a very companionable dog of yours."

Mrs. Benbow darted a look of suspicion at the stranger.

"We call that a cat in Shropshire," she said, beginning to regret that she had agreed to house the stranger.

"Well, no doubt you are partially right," said the stranger solemnly; "but, at the same time, you are partially wrong. To use

the language of the theosophists-"

Mrs. Benbow interrupted him.

"Eat your supper while it is hot," she said, "then perhaps you'll feel better. Your cold is rather heavy in your head, isn't it?"

He laughed good-temperedly, and smiled at her as though to reassure her that he was quite in his right senses; and then, without further discussion, he began to make short work of the fried eggs and bacon. Gamboge, sitting quietly by the fireside, scorned to beg; she preferred to steal. That is a way some people have.

The stranger finished his supper, and lit his pipe. Once or twice he began to doze. The first time he was aroused by Gamboge, who had jumped on the table, and was seeking what she might devour.

"Ah, Gamboge," he said sleepily, "I am sorry I have not left anything appetizing for you. I was so hungry. Pray excuse."

Then he dozed off again. The second time he was aroused by the sound of singing. He caught the words of the chorus:

> "I'll gayly sing from day to day,
> And do the best I can;
> If sorrows meet me on the way,
> I'll bear them like a man."

"An excellent resolution," murmured the stranger, becoming drowsy once more. "Only I wish they'd kept their determinations to themselves."

The third time he was disturbed by the sound of angry voices. There was some quarreling going on in the kitchen of the Green Dragon. The voices became louder. There was a clatter of stools and a crash of glasses.

"You are a pack of lying gypsies!" sang out some one. "You know well you didn't pay the missus!"

"Go for him! go for him!" was the cry.

Then the parlor door was flung open and Mrs. Benbow rushed in. "Oh!" she cried, "those gypsy men are killing the carpenter!"

Hieronymus Howard rushed into the kitchen, and threw himself into the midst of the contest. Three powerful tramps were kicking a figure prostrate on the ground. One other man, Mr. Greaves, the blacksmith, was trying in vain to defend his comrade. He had no chance against these gypsy fellows, and though he fought like a lion, his strength was, of course, nothing against theirs. Old John of the one leg had been knocked over, and was picking himself up with difficulty. Everything depended on the promptness of the stranger. He was nothing of a warrior, this Hieronymus Howard; he was just a quiet student, who knew how to tussle with Greek roots rather than with English tramps. But he threw himself upon the gypsies, fought hand to hand with them, was blinded with blows, nearly trampled beneath their feet, all but crushed against the wall. Now he thrust them back. Now they pressed on him afresh. Now the blacksmith, with desperate effort, attacked them again. Now the carpenter, bruised and battered, but wild for revenge, dragged himself from

the floor, and aimed a blow at the third gypsy's head. He fell. Then after a short, sharp contest, the other two gypsies were driven to the door, which Mrs. Benbow had opened wide, and were thrust out. The door was bolted safely.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.