

**Bangs John Kendrick**

# **Jack and the Check Book**



John Bangs

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# John Kendrick Bangs

## Jack and the Check Book

### I

Once upon a time a great many years ago there lived a poor woman who, having invested all her savings in mining shares, was soon brought to penury and want. She had bought her modest little home and all there was in it on the instalment plan, and here she was, upon a certain beautiful morning in late spring, absolutely penniless, and three days off, staring her in the face, were payments due on the piano, the kitchen range and even on the house itself. Moreover, the winter had been a bitter one. Four times had the water-pipes frozen and burst, and a plumber's bill of appalling magnitude had come in the morning's mail, with the stern admonition stamped in red letters at the bottom:

#### LONG PAST DUE

#### PLEASE REMIT

The unhappy woman was at her wit's ends to know what to do. She had tried to sell her shares in "Amalgamated War-whoop," only to find that that once promising company had passed into the hands of a receiver, and that there was an assessment, amounting to four times their face value, due on the shares, so that every possible purchaser to whom she applied refused to take the stock off her hands unless she paid them five dollars a share for the service and would guarantee them against the chance of further loss. All other means of raising the necessary funds – and she had tried them all – proved equally futile. The savings-banks would not lend her a penny on a house of which the parlor floor alone was clear of obligation, and the threat of the piano people to remove that instrument if the March instalment, now a month over-due, was not immediately forthcoming rendered that both unsalable and valueless as security for a loan.

She sat, the perfect picture of hopeless despair, in her rocking-chair, gazing moodily out of the window, thinking dreadful thoughts, and, it may be, contemplating the alternative of suicide or marriage with the village magnate, a miserable villain whom everybody detested, and who, everybody knew very well, had been instrumental in the ruin of her deceased husband, a once prosperous haberdasher. But on a sudden her look of despair faded wholly away and a great light of happiness illumined her eyes, as up the garden path, whistling merrily as he strode along, came her son Jack, a lad of fifteen, the comfort and solace of her lonely days.

"Dear boy!" she murmured softly to herself as he waved his hand at her, "he is the only thing I have left that there isn't something due on."

The boy, entering the room, still whistling, flung his cap up on the table and kissed his mother affectionately.

"Well, mother," he said, joyously, "our troubles are over at last."

Her face beamed an eager inquiry. The sudden, overwhelming happiness of the news itself deprived her of the power of speech for a moment, and then with difficulty she gasped out the words:

"Then you have secured a place with steady wages, my son?"

Her heart beat wildly as she awaited the answer.

"No, mother," he replied, promptly. "The only position open to me was that of private secretary to old Jonas Bilkins, my father's enemy, and when he found out that I was my father's son he fired me out of his office."

"No wonder!" muttered the woman. "He didn't dare let you have access to his private papers. He knows that every penny he calls his own belongs by right to us, and once you got hold of his letter-files and secret documents you could prove it."

"So he said, mother dear," said the boy. "He was brutally frank about it, and when I told him what I thought of him, and advised him to pick out a nice, comfortable jail to spend his declining years in, he threw his check-book at my head."

"The miserable villain!" groaned the old lady. "Did it hit you?"

"No, indeed," laughed Jack. "My baseball training helped me out there. I caught it on the fly and have brought it home with me. Meanwhile, I have sold the cow."

"You have?" cried the delighted mother, clasping him warmly in her arms.

"Yes," said Jack, proudly. "We need not go hungry to-day, mother. I swapped her off for a pot of beans."

An awful, despairing silence followed this announcement. The old lady loved her son beyond everything in the world, but this was too much even for a mother's love. The idea that a first-class Jersey cow worth not less than forty-five dollars regarded merely as raw material for the table, and not taking into account her value as a producer of rich, creamy milk, should have been bartered for a miserable pot of beans, and doubtless pickled beans at that, was the last straw of misfortune that broke the back of the Camel of Maternal Patience, and with certain phrases of a forceful nature she seized the pot from her son's trembling hand and flung it with such impetus against the garden wall that it was shattered into countless fragments, and the beans scattered in every direction. After this attack of rage she took to her bed, weeping bitterly. Jack too, stunned by his kind mother's wrath, retired to his little cot in the attic, and sought relief from his troubles and the gnawing pangs of hunger in sleep.

But lo and behold! the following morning a strange thing had happened. Jack, upon waking early, found his once sunny window obscured by a heavy growth of leaves, and on dressing rapidly and going into the garden to see what had caused this strange condition of affairs, was surprised to find a splendid bean-stalk sprung up during the night, and, what was still more wonderful, still springing, moving rapidly upward like the escalator he had once seen upon the elevated railway in New York when with his father he had visited that wonderful city to inspect the spring and autumn styles for the haberdashery.

He gazed at it in wondering amazement, and then the silence was broken. "All aboard for Ogreville!" cried a squeaky little voice from behind one of the branches. "Step lively, please! All aboard!"

Jack, nothing loath for a new experience, immediately seated himself astride one of the rapidly rising tendrils, and soon found himself soaring in the upper air, far, far above the earth, upon what he came subsequently to call his "Aero-Bean."

"Well, we have you at last," said the squeaky little voice from behind the leaves, pleasantly. "You may not remember it, my lad, but you once gave up your strap on a subway train to a tired-looking woman and she has never forgotten your kindness. It so happens that she was Queen of the Fairies, and later on she became Chairman of the Board of Directors of the United States Fairy Corporation of Wall Street. You are now about to receive your reward. You have Major Bilkins's check-book with you?"

"Yes," said Jack. "He threw it at me yesterday, and I've had it ever since."

"Good!" said the squeaky little voice. "What is the old man's balance?"

"Three million five hundred and seventy-five thousand four hundred and fifty-seven dollars," said Jack, reading off the figures slowly, and gasping at the thought of anybody's having so much money as that on hand.

"H'm!" said the squeaky little voice. "It is rather less than I had thought. However, we can fix that without much trouble. Zeros are cheap. Just add six of them to that balance."

"Do you mean add or affix?" asked Jack.

"Affix is what I should have said," replied the squeaky little voice. "Get out your fountain pen and tag 'em on."

Jack immediately obeyed.

"Now what does it come to?" asked the little voice.

"Three trillion five hundred and seventy-five billion four hundred and fifty-seven million dollars," stammered Jack, his eyes bulging with amazement.

"That's better," laughed the little voice. "Thus you see, my boy, how easy it is to make much out of a little if you only know how. Three and a half trillions is a pretty tidy bit of pocket-money for a boy of your age. So be careful how you use it, my son. Use it wisely, and all will be well with you."

As the voice spoke these words the growing stalk came to a sudden stop, and the voice added: "Ogreville! Last stop! All out!"

The boy stepped off the stalk, and found himself in a magnificently broad and fertile country. Great fields of waving grain, numberless pasturages filled with prize cattle of all sorts, surrounded him on every hand. Trees heavily laden with rare fruits bordered the highways, and everything everywhere bore unmistakable evidences of a rare prosperity.

"Phe-e-ew!" whistled Jack, blinking with joy at all he saw before him. "This looks like the land of milk and honey all right. And only twenty minutes by bean-car from New York! What a chance for corner lots, and an easy suburb for business men!"

The lad wandered along for a while, rejoicing in all the beauties of the wondrous scene, when, coming to a turn in the magnificently laid road, he perceived not far ahead of him a splendidly built castle, much resembling a famous city hotel he had once passed on a sight-seeing coach, and, remembering on a sudden that he had had no breakfast, he walked boldly up to the main entrance and knocked on the massive bronze door. A beautiful young girl about his own age answered the summons.

"I don't know if this is a hotel," said Jack, politely, "but if it is, might I get a bite here?"

"I fear you might if my stepfather should happen to see you," replied the girl with a shudder, her face mantling with a deep luscious red, the like of which Jack had never seen anywhere save on the petal of a rose or the cheek of a cherry.

The silvery tones of her voice thrilled him.

"Thank you," he said, stepping into the hallway through the open door. "I shall be very glad to meet your stepfather, and if, while I am waiting, I might have a couple of scrambled eggs and a cup of coffee – "

"Oh, go! Do not stay here!" pleaded the girl. "Please go!"

"I go?" laughed Jack. "And leave you? Never!"

"But you do not understand," trembled the girl. "My stepfather is an ogre, and he eats – "

"I only understand one thing," said Jack, valiantly. "And that is that I love you with all my heart. I don't care if your stepfather eats – "

"For my sake then, go!" pleaded the girl. "I too am not unsusceptible to the dart of love, and for the first time I look upon a spirit I could honor and obey, but – "

"Then it is love at first sight for both of us," said Jack, folding her in his arms.

It was indeed a blissful moment for both, but alas! it was more than fleeting, for suddenly there came from an inner room off the great corridor a terrific voice, roaring:

"FEE-FO-FI-FOY!  
I SMELL THE BLOOD OF A HIGH-SCHOOL BOY.  
BE HE REAL OR BE HE FAKE

## I'LL GRIND HIS BONES FOR A BUCKWHEAT CAKE."

"Oho!" cried Jack, springing back. "I think I've heard something like that before. This is not a hotel, but the castle of that child-eating ogre –"

"The very same!" cried the girl, her face blanching with terror. "And, what is worse, he hasn't had a boy to eat for three weeks. If you truly love me, I beg you will fly at once."

"Sorry to be disobliging, but I can't fly, my beloved. I've left my aeroplane at home. In short, my dear – er – er – what is your name, sweetheart?"

"Beanhilda," replied the blushing girl.

"In short, my dear Beanhilda," Jack resumed, "having no wings, I cannot fly."

"Alas!" cried the girl, bursting into floods of tears as the ogre suddenly appeared in the hallway, and seizing Jack by the collar of his coat held him high in the air between his thumb and forefinger. "Alas! it is too late. I shall never get a fiancé past step-papa's breakfast-table!"

"No, my child," grinned the ogre, smacking his lips hungrily. "It is not too late. He is just in time. I have been wanting a couple of poached boys on toast for three solid weeks, and the butcher has just telephoned me that there isn't a fresh kid to be had for love or money in any of the markets."

"I am sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Ogre," said Jack, as calmly as he could under the trying circumstances, "but I won't poach well. I'm half-back on our high-school eleven, and, as a matter of fact, am known as the toughest lad in my native town."

A shadow of disappointment crossed the ogre's face.

"Confound football!" he growled. "I haven't managed to get a tender boy since the season opened."

"Moreover," said Jack, seeing that the time for strategy had arrived, "I didn't come here for your breakfast, I came for mine."

"By Jove, you shall have it!" cried the ogre, slapping the table with his fists so hard that the platters and glasses upon its broad surface jumped up and down. "I like nerve, and you are the only kid I've caught in forty years that didn't begin to yell like mad the minute I grabbed him. We'll keep you here and feed you on the fat of the land, until you have sort of softened up. Sit down, sir, and have your fill. Beanhilda, get the lad a cup of coffee."

The ogre placed Jack in a high-chair at his side, and they breakfasted together like two old cronies, the fair Beanhilda waiting upon them, and with every passing moment convincing Jack, by her grace, beauty, and amiability, of the solid fact that he loved her ardently. It was a terrible sight to see the ogre swallow a whole lamb at one bite, taking it up by its tail and dropping it into his mouth as if it were no more than a stalk of asparagus, and consuming not less than fifty-seven varieties of breakfast food, boxes, wrapping, premiums and all at one spoonful, but the lad's nerve never deserted him for a moment, and he chatted away as pleasantly as though breakfasting with ogres was one of the accustomed operations of his every-day life.

"This is a great place you have here, Mr. Ogre," he remarked, sipping his coffee slowly. "Of course, it isn't quite as rich and fertile as my own little place up in Vermont, and your cattle, though evidently of fine breed, are hardly what Montana ranch-men would consider first class. Still –"

The ogre stopped eating and looked at the speaker with considerable surprise.

"You mean to say you can beat this place of mine anywhere?" he demanded.

"Well," said Jack, amiably, "of course I don't mean to criticise this beautiful country. It is very beautiful in its own way, and there is some evidence of wealth here. I was only saying that next to my place it comes pretty near to being the finest I ever saw."

"I guess you'd go a good many miles before you'd see a castle like mine," said the ogre, with a proud glance around him.

"I haven't seen your castle yet, sir," said Jack. "But this little bungalow we are in strikes me as about as cute and comfy a cozy-corner as I've visited in a month of Sundays."

"Bungalow?" roared the giant. "You don't call this a bungalow, do you?"

"Why, yes," said Jack. "It certainly isn't a tent, or a chicken-coop, or a tool-house, is it? It's mighty comfy anyhow, whatever you call it. I wouldn't mind owning it myself."

A glitter came into the ogre's eyes. If this young man were merely bluffing now was the time to call him.

"Oh, as for that," said the ogre, with a sarcastic laugh, "you can own it – that is, you can if you can pay for it. I'll sell."

Here he winked at the butler as much as to say, "Now we'll see him flop." But Jack had no intention of flopping.

"Really?" he said, with a great show of enthusiasm. "Well, this is fine. I hadn't the slightest idea the place was in the market, but if we can get together on a figure, I might be tempted. How much?"

"What would you say to \$2,500,000?" demanded the ogre, with a grim smile.

"Done!" said Jack. "And cheap at the price."

Here he drew out the check-book, and drew a check for the full amount to the order of William J. Ogre, Esq., which he tossed across the table to the amazed giant.

"There's your money," he said. "Fork over the deeds."

The ogre rubbed his eyes, and almost stopped breathing for a moment.

"H'm!" he muttered, inspecting the check closely. "This looks pretty good to me. What kind of a book is that, young man?"

"That?" laughed Jack. "Oh, that's what we call the magic check-book. It is the kind that all our big financiers use – Mr. Rockernegie, Colonel Midas, and John Jacob Rothschild, and all the rest of them. It is merely an ingenious financial contrivance that enables us to avoid contact with actual money, which is not only vulgar and dangerous to carry in large quantities, but in some cases is full of germs." The lad went on and explained to the ogre just how checks were drawn and presented for payment.

"It's a pretty nice sort of an arrangement, that," said the ogre, very much interested, "but suppose you draw out your whole balance, what then?"

"All you have to do is to affix a half dozen ciphers to the remainder before you start the overdraft," said Jack. "For instance, on my way up here this morning I found that the balance on hand was only \$3,575,457, so, feeling that I should be more comfortable with just a little more ready money to carry me along, I added those six ciphers you see on the right-hand side of the figures, bringing the balance up to \$3,575,457,000,000. If you will examine the ciphers under a microscope, sir, you will note that they have only recently been entered."

"By thunder!" roared the ogre, glaring at the book enviously. "This is one of the marvels of the age. Why, armed with a book like that you can buy anything in sight!"

"If the other man will sell," said Jack. "By-the-way, would you mind if I lit my after-breakfast cigarette?"

"Go ahead! Go ahead! Do anything you darn please," said the ogre, gazing at him with wonder.

Jack thereupon drew a check for \$500,000, tore it from the book, and rolled it into a small cylinder, which he filled with some corn-silk he had in his pocket, and then lit it with another check for a similar amount.

The ogre's eyes nearly popped out of his head at such a marvellous exhibition of resources.

"It makes an expensive smoke," smiled Jack, settling back to the enjoyment of the cigarette, "but after all, as long as I have the money, why not enjoy myself? Will you join me?"

He took up his pen as though to make another.

"No, no, no!" cried the ogre, walking agitatedly up and down the floor. "I – er – I'm afraid it's too soon after breakfast for me. Do you mean to tell me that such an inexhaustible treasure as this really exists?"

"There it is, right before your eyes," said Jack. "Suppose we test it. Think of a large sum of money, tell me what it is, and see if I can't go you a dollar better."

"Four hundred millions!" cried the ogre, impulsively.

"Piker!" ejaculated Jack, with a smile, as he drew his check for \$400,000,001.

"A billion and a half!" cried the ogre.

"Now you're beginning to get your pace," laughed Jack. "There's my check, sir, for \$1,500,000,001, according to specifications."

"That reduces your balance some, though," said the ogre.

"Yes," said Jack. "It reduces it by \$1,900,000,002, leaving me with only \$3,573,574,999,998 on hand, but if I affix six ciphers to that, as I will now proceed to do, I have, as the figures conclusively show, \$3,575,574,999,998,000,000, or about a squillion more than I had before I began to draw."

The ogre collapsed in his chair. The magnitude of these figures appalled him.

"Great glory!" he cried. "I didn't know there was that much money in the world. Can – can anybody work that book?"

"Anybody who comes by it honestly and without trickery," said Jack. "Of course, if a man gets hold of it in an unscrupulous way, or goes back on his bargain, it's as valueless to him as so much waste paper."

The ogre strode up and down the room, filled with agitation. He had thought to trick the boy out of his wonderful possession – in fact, to swallow him whole and then appropriate his treasure, but Jack's explanation put an entirely new phase on the matter.

"I suppose you wouldn't part with that book?" he finally asked.

"Yes," said Jack. "I'll let you have it if you will transfer all your property irrevocably to your stepdaughter, Beanhilda, and give me her hand in marriage."

"It's a bargain!" gulped the ogre, whereupon he summoned his lawyers and his secretaries, and by noon all his possessions had passed beyond recall into the hands of Beanhilda. A special messenger was sent down the bean-stalk to fetch Jack's mother, and that afternoon the happy lad and the fair Princess of Ogreville were married with much pomp and ceremony.

"Bless you, my children!" murmured the ogre, as the irrevocable words were spoken by the priest, and Jack passed the magic check-book over to its new owner. "May you live long and happily. As for me, I'm off for a week's vacation in little old New York."

"How did you manage it, sweetheart?" whispered Beanhilda in her husband's ear a few weeks later. "Step-papa had such a penchant for hard-boiled boys that I feared you were lost the moment he appeared."

Jack explained the whole history of the magic check-book to her, but when he had done, his bride grew white.

"But what if he comes back?" she cried, shuddering with fear. "His vengeance will be terrible."

"Have no fear, Beanhilda," Jack answered. "He will not return. Read that."

And he handed her an evening paper in which, with rapidly drying eyes, she read the following:

## **SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS FOR PASSING BAD CHECKS**

William J. Ogre, claiming to be a prominent resident of Ogreville, who was arrested at the St. Gotham Hotel last Thursday afternoon on a charge of having passed a dozen bogus checks for amounts ranging from ten to fifteen thousand dollars apiece, was found guilty yesterday by a jury in the criminal branch of the United States Circuit Court. He was sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment at hard labor in the Federal Prison at Thomasville, Georgia, on each of the five different counts, making his prison term in all not less than seventy-five years. Other

indictments are still pending against him for forgery on the complaint of Major Bilkins, president of the Suburban Trust Company, of whose name he was found availing himself in his criminal transactions. Major Bilkins, when seen last night by a reporter of this paper, stated his intention of keeping the shameless operator in jail for the rest of his natural life.

"I shouldn't sit up for papa if I were you, Beanhilda," said Jack, with a smile. "It looks to me as if he was going to be detained down-town late on business."

And the young couple lived happily forever after.

## II

# THE GREAT WISH SYNDICATE

The farm had gone to ruin. On every side the pastures were filled with a rank growth of thistles and other thorn-bearing flora. The farm buildings had fallen into a condition of hopeless disrepair, and the old house, the ancestral home of the Wilbrahams, had become a place of appalling desolation. The roof had been patched and repatched for decades, and now fulfilled none of the ideals of its roofhood save that of antiquity. There was not, as far as the eye could see, a single whole pane of glass in any one of the many windows of the mansion, and there were not wanting those in the community who were willing to prophesy that in a stiff gale – such as used to be prevalent in that section of the world, and within the recollection of some of the old settlers too – the chimneys, once the pride of the county, would totter and fall, bringing the whole mansion down into chaos and ruin. In short, the one-time model farm of the Wilbrahams had become a by-word and a jest and, as some said, of no earthly use save for the particular purposes of the eccentric artist in search of picturesque subject-matter for his studies in oil.

It was a wild night, and within the ancient house sat the owner, Richard Wilbraham, his wife not far away, trying to find room upon her husband's last remaining pair of socks to darn them. Wilbraham gazed silently into the glowing embers on the hearth before them, the stillness of the evening broken only by the hissing of the logs on the andirons and an occasional sigh from one of the watchers.

Finally the woman spoke.

"When does the mortgage fall due, Richard?" she asked, moving uneasily in her chair.

"To-morrow," gulped the man, the word seeming to catch in his throat and choke him.

"And you – you are sure Colonel Digby will not renew it?" she queried.

"He even declines to discuss the matter," said Wilbraham. "He contents himself with shaking it in my face every time I approach his office, while he tells his office-boy to escort me to the door. I don't believe in signs, Ethelinda, but I do believe that that is an omen that if the money is not forthcoming at noon to-morrow you and I will be roofless by this time to-morrow night."

The woman shuddered.

"But, Richard," she protested, "you – you had put by the money to pay it long ago. What has become of it?"

"Gone, Ethelinda – gone in that ill-advised egg deal I tried to put through two years ago," sighed Wilbraham, as he buried his face in his hands to hide his grief and mortification. "I sold eggs short," he added. "You remember when that first batch of incubator hens began laying so prolifically – it seemed to me as though Fortune stared me in the face – nay, held out her hands to me and bade me welcome to a share in her vast estates. There was a great shortage of eggs in the market that year, and I went to New York and sold them by the dozens – hundreds of dozens – thousands of dozens –"

He rose up from his chair and paced the floor in an ecstasy of agitation. "I sold eggs by the million, Ethelinda," he went on, by a great effort regaining control of himself. "Eggs to be laid by hens whose great-great-grandmothers had yet to be hatched from eggs yet unlaied by unborn chickens."

Wilbraham's voice sank to a hoarse, guttural whisper.

"And the deliveries have bankrupted me," he muttered. "The price of eggs has risen steadily for the past eighteen months, and yesterday a hundred thousand of January, strictly fresh, that I had to buy in the open market in order to fill my contracts, cost me not only my last penny, but were in part paid for with a sixty-day note that I cannot hope to meet. In other words, Ethelinda, we are ruined."

The woman made a brave struggle to be strong, but the strain was too much for her tired nerves and she broke down and wept bitterly.

"We have but four hens left," Wilbraham went on, speaking in a hollow voice. "At most, working them to their full capacity, in thirty days from now we shall have only ten dozen eggs added to our present store, and upon that date I have promised to deliver to the International Cold Storage Company one thousand dozen at twenty-two and a half cents a dozen. Even with the mortgage out of the way we should still be securely bound in the clutch of bankruptcy."

A long silence ensued. The clock out in the hall ticked loudly, each clicking sound falling upon Wilbraham's ears like a sledge-hammer blow in a forge, welding link by link a chain of ruin that should forever bind him in the shackles of misery. Unbroken save by the banging now and then of a shutter in the howling wind without, the silence continued for nearly an hour, when the nerve-killing monotony of the ceaseless "tick-tock, tick-tock" of the clock was varied by a resounding hammering upon the door.

"It is very late," said the woman. "Who do you suppose can be calling at this hour? Be careful when you open the door – it may be a highwayman."

"I should welcome a highwayman if he could help me to find anything in the house worth stealing," said Wilbraham, as he rose from his chair and started for the door. "Whoever it may be, it is a wild night, and despite our poverty we can still keep open house for the stranger on the moor."

He hastened to the door and flung it wide.

"Who's there?" he cried, gazing out into the blackness of the storm.

A heavy gust of wind, icy cold, blew out his candle, and a great mass of sleet coming in with it fell with a dull, sodden thud on the floor at his feet, and some of it cut his cheek.

"I am a wanderer," came a faint voice from without, "frozen and starved. In the name of humanity I beg you to take me in, lest I faint and perish."

"Come in, come in!" cried Wilbraham. "Whoever you are, you are more than welcome to that which is left us; little enough in all conscience."

An aged man, bent and weary, staggered in through the door. Wilbraham sprang toward him and caught his fainting form in his strong arms. Tenderly he led him to his own abandoned chair by the fireside, where he and his faithful wife chafed the old fellow's hands until warmth had returned to them.

"A cup of tea, my dear," said Wilbraham. "It will set him up."

"And a morsel to eat, I implore you," pleaded the stranger, in a weak, tremulous voice. "The merest trifle, good sir, even if it be only an egg!"

The woman grew rigid at the suggestion. "An egg? At this time when eggs are –" she began.

"There, there, Ethelinda," interrupted Wilbraham, gently. "We have two left in the ice-box – your breakfast and mine. Rather than see this good old man suffer longer I will gladly go without mine. The fact is, eggs have sort of disagreed with me latterly anyhow, and –"

"It is as you say, Richard," said the woman, meekly, as with a hopeless sigh she turned toward the kitchen, whence in a short time she returned, bearing a steaming creation of her own make – a lustrous, golden egg, poached, and lying invitingly upon the crisp bosom of a piece of toast. It was a sight of beauty, and Wilbraham's mouth watered as he gazed hungrily upon it.

And then the unexpected happened: The aged stranger, instead of voraciously devouring the proffered meal, with a kindly glance upon his host, raised his withered hands aloft as though to pronounce a benediction upon him, and in a chanting tone droned forth the lines:

"Who eats this egg and toast delicious  
Receives the gift of three full wishes —  
Thus do the fairy folk reward  
The sacrifices of this board."

A low, rumbling peal of thunder and a blinding flash as of the lightning followed, and when the brilliant illumination of the latter had died away the stranger had vanished.

Wilbraham looked at his wife, dumb with amazement, and she, tottering backward into her chair, gazed back, her eyes distended with fear.

"Have I – have I been dreaming?" he gasped, recovering his speech in a moment. "Or have we really had a visitor?"

"I was going to ask you the same question, Richard," she replied. "It really was so very extraordinary, I can hardly believe –"

And then their eyes fell upon the steaming egg, still lying like a beautiful sunset on a background of toast upon the table.

"The egg!" she cried, hoarsely. "It must have been true."

"Will you eat it?" asked Wilbraham, politely extending the platter in her direction.

"Never!" she cried, shuddering. "I should not dare. It is too uncanny."

"Then I will," said Wilbraham. "If the old man spoke the truth –"

He swallowed the egg at a single gulp.

"Fine!" he murmured, in an ecstasy of gastronomic pleasure. "I wish there were two more just like it!"

No sooner had he spoken these words than two more poached eggs, even as he had wished, appeared upon the platter.

"Great heavens, Ethelinda!" he cried. "The wishes come true! I wish to goodness I knew who that old duffer was."

The words had scarcely fallen from his lips when a card fluttered down from the ceiling. Wilbraham sprang forward excitedly and caught it as it fell. It read:

## **HENRY W. OBERON**

### **Secretary, The United States Fairy Co.,**

#### **3007 Wall Street**

"Henry W. Oberon, United States Fairy Company, Wall Street, eh?" he muttered. "By Jove, I wish I knew –"

"Stop!" cried his wife, seizing him by the arm, imploringly. "Do stop, Richard. You have used up two of your wishes already. Think what you need most before you waste the third."

"Wise Ethelinda," he murmured, patting her gently on the hand. "Very, very wise, and I will be careful. Let me see now... I wish I had ... I wish I had..."

He paused for a long time, and then his face fairly beamed with a great light of joy.

"I wish I had three more wishes!" he cried.

Another crash of thunder shook the house to its very foundations, and a lightning flash turned the darkness of the interior of the dwelling into a vivid golden yellow that dazzled them, and then all went dusk again.

"Mercy!" shuddered the good wife. "I hope that was an answer to your wish."

"It won't take long to find out," said Wilbraham. "I'll tackle a few more natural desires right here and now, and if they come true I'll know that that thunderbolt was a rush message from the United States Fairy Company telling me to draw on them at sight."

"Well, don't be extravagant," his wife cautioned him.

"I'll be as extravagant as I please," he retorted. "If my fourth wish works, Ethelinda, my address from this hour on will be Easy Street and Treasury Avenue. I wish first then that this old farm was in Ballyhack!"

"Ballyhack! Last station – all out!" cried a hoarse voice at the door.

Wilbraham rushed to the window and peered out into what had been the night, but had now become a picture of something worse. Great clouds of impenetrable smoke hung over the grim stretches of a dismal-looking country in which there seemed to be nothing but charred remnants of ruined trees and blackened rocks, over which, in an endless line, a weary mass of struggling plodders, men and women, toiled onward through the grime of a hopeless environment.

"Great Scott!" he cried, in dismay, as the squalid misery of the prospect smote upon his vision. "This is worse than Diggville. I wish to heaven we were back again."

"Diggville! Change cars for Easy Street and Fortune Square!" cried the hoarse voice at the door, and Wilbraham, looking out through the window again, was rejoiced to find himself back amid familiar scenes.

"They're working all right," he said, gleefully.

"Yes," said his wife. "They seem to be and you seem to be speculating as usual upon a narrow margin. Again you have only one wish left, having squandered four out of the five already used."

"And why not, my dear," smiled Wilbraham, amiably, "when my next wish is to be for six spandy new wishes straight from the factory?"

Mrs. Wilbraham's face cleared.

"Oh, splendid!" she cried, joyously. "Wish it – wish it – do hurry before you forget."

"I do wish it – six more wishes on the half-shell!" roared Wilbraham.

As before, came the thunder and the lightning.

"Thank you!" said Wilbraham. "These fairies are mighty prompt correspondents. I am beginning to see my way out of our difficulties, Ethelinda," he proceeded, rubbing his hands together unctuously. "Instead of dreading to-morrow and the maturity of that beastly old mortgage, I wish to thunder it were here, and that the confounded thing were paid off."

The wish, expressed impulsively, brought about the most astonishing results. The hall clock began instantly to whirr and to wheeze, its hands whizzing about as though upon a well-oiled pivot. The sun shot up out of the eastern horizon as though fired from a cannon, and before the amazed couple could realize what was going on, the village clock struck the hour of noon, and they found themselves bowing old Colonel Digby, the mortgage holder, out of the house, while Wilbraham himself held in his right hand a complete satisfaction of that depressing document.

"Now," said Wilbraham, "I feel like celebrating. What would you say to a nice little luncheon, my dear? Something simple, but good – say some Russian caviare, Lynnhaven Bay oysters, real turtle soup, terrapin, canvas-back duck, alligator-pear salad, and an orange brûlot for two, eh?"

"It would be fine, Richard," replied the lady, her eyes flashing with joy, "but I don't know where we could get such a feast here. The Diggville markets are –"

"Markets?" cried Wilbraham, contemptuously. "What have we to do with markets from this time on? Markets are nothing to me. I merely wish that we had that repast right here and now, ready to –"

"Luncheon is served, sir," said a tall, majestic-looking stranger, entering from the dining-room.

"Ah! Really?" said Wilbraham. "And who the dickens are you?"

"I am the head butler of the Fairies' Union assigned to your service, sir," replied the stranger, civilly, making a low bow to Mrs. Wilbraham.

There is no use of describing the meal. It was all there as foreshadowed in Wilbraham's gastronomically inspired menu, and having had nothing to eat since the night before, the fortunate couple did full justice to it.

"Before we go any further, Richard," said Mrs. Wilbraham, after the duck had been served, "do you happen to remember how many of your last six wishes are left?"

"No, I don't," said Wilbraham.

"Then you had better order a few more lest by the end of this charming repast you forget," said the thoughtful woman.

"Good scheme, Ethelinda," said Wilbraham. "I'll put in a bid for a gross right away. There is no use in piking along in small orders when you can do a land-office business without lifting your little finger."

"And don't you think, too, dear," the woman continued, "that it would be well for us to open a set of books – a sort of General Wish Account – so that we shall not at any time by some unfortunate mistake overdraw our balance?"

"Ethelinda," cried Wilbraham, his face glowing with enthusiastic admiration, "you have, without any exception, the best business head that ever wore a pompadour!"

Thus it began. A cash-book was purchased and in its columns, like so many entries of mere dollars, Wilbraham entered his income in wishes, faithfully recording on the opposite page his expenditures in the same. The first entry of one gross was made that very night:

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Before long others followed and were used to such an effect that at the end of the year, by a careful manipulation of his resources, carefully husbanding the possibilities of that original third wish, Wilbraham found that he had expressed and had had gratified over ten thousand wishes, all of such a nature that the one-time decrepit farm had now become one of the handsomest estates in the country. A château stood on the site of the old mansion. Where the barns had been in danger of falling of their own weight were now to be found rows of well-stocked cattle-houses and dairies of splendor. The decaying stables had become garages of unusual magnificence, wherein cars of all horsepowers and models panted, eager to be chugging over the roads of Diggville, which by a single wish expressed by Wilbraham had become wondrously paved boulevards. And in the chicken-yards that had taken the place of the discouraging coops of other days thousands of hens laid their daily quota of prosperity for their owner in the plush-upholstered nests provided for their comfort by Wilbraham, the egg king, for that was what he had now become. In all parts of the world his fame was heralded, and hosts of sight-seers came daily to see the wonderful acres of this lordly master of the world's egg supply. And, best of all, there was still a balance of forty-three hundred and eighty-seven wishes to his credit!

The leading financiers of the world now began to take notice of this new figure in the realm of effort, for they soon found their most treasured and surest schemes going awry in a most unaccountable manner. No matter how much they tried to depress or to stimulate the market, some new and strange factor seemed to be at work bringing their calculations to naught, and when it became known to them that the mere expression of a wish on the part of Wilbraham would send stocks kiting into the air or crashing into the depths, no matter what they might do, they began to worry.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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