

THE LAME MOUSE.

IN TWO PARTS.

(Concluded from p. 135.)

PART II.

THE following night the four little mice returned, each with his gift, and all anxious to see the strange giver, which came and went so strangely on the previous night.

Though they waited long for him he did not come, and at last they all agreed to take the journey to the pine hill in company, that each might see his opal burst into a flame, and become the possessor of a star. A day was given for rest and preparation. The journey began with the rising of the moon. The birds and flowers had closed their eyes to dream, and the wind was sleeping softly in the tree-tops, when the four little mice went down the garden-path and out into the open way. They were too anxious to be talkative, and went on through woods and fields and gardens, thinking very much, but saying little.

"Whither bound?" a Glowworm asked, as it lighted them through a dark and thick part of a wood with its tender lamp.

They did not answer. It looked ungrateful, but then they were in a hurry, and had a long way to go. Morning found them in a cottage, beneath some wood which lay in a corner of the room. Weary and hungry they were, no doubt, yet they waited for food until the whole family had gone forth into the fields. The crumbs which lay beneath the table were enough to satisfy Masters Mottle, Grey, and Brown, but not the President. He could not journey to the pine-covered hill with a gold cord around his neck, and an opal in his bosom, on such fare. "The cupboard must be richer," he thought, creeping towards it. A sudden rush of cold air, a black shadow on their faces, and a cry of pain, sent the three with haste and trembling to their corner. They crept forth when the moon had risen, and found their friend stiff and cold amid the

ashes beneath the fireless grate. The gift was gone.

"And ours?" they asked each other with a shudder. Mottle and Grey found their gold cords were tarnished, and the opals very pale. They thought this was so because they kept them too much from the light, so they smoothed down the fur upon their bosoms, and laid the opals on them with the gold cords all in view. The little lame mouse crept behind the baby's crib, and warmed his with a tear.

Their journey on the following night was long and weary. The rain came down in big cold drops until they trembled. Mottle and Grey pushed on, caring little for their poor lame friend, who crept slowly in the rear. Morning found the two in a warm hay-stack, weary, wet, and dispirited, and with longing thoughts for the home which they had left behind.

"Where is Brown?" Mottle asked of Grey.

"I neither know nor care," Grey answered. "He creeps so slowly, there's no comfort in his company. I believe that old white mouse meant us no good when he sent us on this fool's errand. I am for going back again. What say you?"

"And be laughed at for our pains?"

"Let them laugh who win," said Grey. "I thought the hill was close by, but I believe it is as far off as ever. There is nothing for it but back again. See my gold cord: it is as black as ink; and this stone has no colour, and feels like lead upon my breast."

Getting angry, he flung it from him into the field. A lark rose where it fell, and went singing into the clouds.

"Good dog, good dog, well done," Grey stretched himself on the wet grass with a quiver, and then lay still. Snap licked his lips and followed at his master's heels as he went laughing home. Poor Master Grey!