

At the Sign of the Wooden Leg

By "Silas Wegg."

A Cow upon the Stairs.

Little Sally Wegg did not sleep well the first night we were at the Farm. She heard, so she said, the footfalls of a cow upon the stairs. She had seen a cow that day for the first time in her life and had run terror-stricken to the house at the sight. She would not stir from the house all day, contenting herself with excursions to the windows, only to retire hastily to shelter beneath the table when she caught a glimpse of Moolie in the field. And so at night time she went to bed with her little mind full of fears. Thus it was she came to think during the still hours when the household was asleep, that she heard the footfalls of a cow upon the stairs.

All the members of the household were not asleep, for I was awake, hearing, like little Sally, the footfalls of a stair-climbing cow. For my days were not without their fears, and in the stillness of the night, the Moolie of my imagination dogged me to my bedside. Like the didactic non-performer that I am, I went to Sally's cot and counselled her as to the impossibility of her cow opening the door, which I assured her was bolted and locked—I went and brought the key for her to look at—and then climbing the winding stairway even if it could break into the house. She was "not wholly reassured and comforted," but dropped off to sleep after a while, clutching the door-key in her tiny hand. I returned to my pillow—to listen for the footsteps of my cow.

That cow is now dead, and I smile to think of the fears I had concerning

it. But all my cows are not dead. Even yet, despite the lessons that Sally's experience and my own have taught me, I lie awake at times and think I hear the footfalls of a cow upon the stairs.

"O purblind race of miserable men,
How many among us at this very hour
Do forge a lifelong trouble for ourselves
By taking true for false or false for true!"

There are thousands of troubles that do overtake us and tens of thousands that may waylay us, but more sleep is lost on account of impossible troubles than on account of all the actual and probable troubles combined. It is so in my case at any rate. I have had very few misfortunes but I have had hosts upon hosts of misgivings in my lifetime. I lost my leg once, but I have lost my head a thousand times. Once, and once only, a burglar climbed my stairs. He found little to steal and went away without anyone being aware, at the time, of his visit. Rats and mice have climbed my stairs also and have even gnawed and nibbled at my wooden leg. They came and went while I snored in blissful ignorance. How often, though, I have raised my head from my pillow and listened for a cow to plant her foot upon another step of the stairway! There are some gray hairs on my head. Half of them are due to the vigils I have kept while waiting for the second footfall of that mythological beast, the stair-climbing cow.

Imagination, like fire, is a good servant but a bad master. With imagination harnessed to the chariot of intellect, one can ride to the uttermost parts of the world and travel back to