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## Flickerlight

Written for The Western Home Monthly by W. R. Gilbert.

ONCE upon a time, but not so very long ago, for this is not quite an ordinary fairy tale, a woman sat by the fire. A basket of mended socks and stockings lay by her side, upon the hearthrug; one of her hands was still gloved in the last stocking and the other, armed with a thimble and needle, was crossed over it. Outside a cab had just rattled by with a theatre-fare and the rain murmured the water song in a low, crooning patter.

Inside, the little castle of coals had just collapsed with a tiny explosion at the very minute when the clock on the mantelshelf struck twelve, and because the oil in the lamp had waxed low, the flickers of the disturbed embers danced like flitting coons over the ceilings and the walls, over the bent, grey tinged head of the woman darning, and across the little table set with cloth and laid out with a simple supper.

Perhaps it was because all fairies—real fairies, and dream fairies love midnight, perhaps, too, because the woman had been up early and was very tired, and her boy, for whom she would always wait up was often late in coming home o' nights, her eyes closed, but though she was asleep she still saw the room in its flickering lights and shadows.

And in sleep one sees, of course, lots of strange things without thinking them strange at all, and so it did not strike

appeared to have been hunted and starved out of her, but was not even quite dead.

The creature gazed up mutely into the eyes of the woman darning.

Just in the flickerlight they looked at each other, the woman and her elf-child. "Speak," said the figure in the chair opposite, and the elf-child spoke.

There was something strange, rapid, hopelessly intense, in the manner in which she said:

"Mother, have you forgotten me quite, quite? Cared for at my birth eagerly tended and nourished, fed and clothed, and then left and forgotten. A life given birth to and then neglected all these long weary years of waiting. Was it right, Mother?"

The woman started, drew back from the child-speaker, then stooping, lifted the frail little creature in her arms, and looking through it into the fire was silent, while something of dawning remembrance moved in her heart. "You are alone?" she asked at last. "You have been quite utterly alone since you were born, did you say?"

"I have sisters, said the child, but they have been abandoned like me, very early. We have all been forgotten by our Mother."

And as the woman steadily looked at the firelight, the living, dying flames



An interesting glee party.

her as anything frightening or much out of the ordinary that at first dimly, and then quite distinctly, she became conscious that something or some one occupied the other chair by the fireside. The personality seemed half-known and yet half-familiar to her and while her mind was busily running over likenesses to persons whom she had known since long ago in childhood, and passing up the years, the figure spoke.

"You are trying to identify me. You are right to hunt the long ago, but not among your friends—Mother."

"Mother?" echoed the woman in wonderment. "I have never been a mother except in longing or in my dreams. This, my son, for whom I am waiting tonight, is a foundling, a foster child."

"Nevertheless you are my mother," reiterated the figure. "From your womb I came, as also did those whom I will show you now."

"Nay, do not mock me, a poor, barren, wasted life;" moaned the woman, but even as she spoke a tiny hand laid hold of her own, gloved in the stocking. Wasted, shrunken, and crippled it was, yet, as it rested on hers, it vibrated with passionate entreaty.

Looking down, the woman saw beside her a wizened elf-figure, with clothes half made, having in the grim, upturned wistful face a promise of beauty, belied by long set-up disease.

The garments the child wore had been of careful cut and fashion, but they were torn and pinned loosely together, showing glimpses of bare skin and bone, for the creature was very emaciated. There was about her, too, a vague atmosphere of scare, a wild pleading for self-expression and development balked, which, child though she seemed,

that leapt and danced before her eyes, a procession of little elf-children, many of them beautiful, only each one despoiled by disease, sorrow and neglect, passed across the hearthrug from the darkness where the flickering flame did not reach on the one hand to the same shrouding darkness of the opposite corner.

And as she watched, sorrow, remorse, vague and uneasy, settled down in her heart, and tears came into her eyes, so that she saw no more the elf-child on her lap nor the figure sitting on the opposite chair. She saw only a blurred mist of flame-edged crystals, dancing, wheeling and turning in the flickerlight, and the voice that she heard seemed to come from far away, but it's sound was like the voice of the cinders when they move closer together to whisper confidences as the flames dies low.

"Oh, Mother," she heard the voice say; "Mother who, always longing for a child, has bemoaned fate and beseeched for long years that the gift of motherhood might be yours. Does not something stirring in your heart tell you that we are your offspring. You have thought us, caused us to be, all of us, but for me alone have you cared long enough to bring to strength and usefulness. All these others you have created, and neglected. Think, a mother who has brought up her tender care but one child in so many. They were all God-given children, they might have been doing all these years such great and good things in the world, if you had only been a mother to them always."

"Why do they not die?" moaned the woman, gazing at the fire, but seeing it not. "Surely it were kinder for them—to me."

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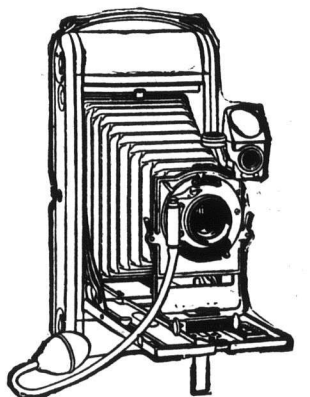
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