

THE NURSING OF ANTAEUS 5

grew tedious ; he took his muffled body to the head of the staircase, lingered there till patience once more became an apparent folly, and at last let a bold proposition venture ahead of the scruples which stayed his feet. From top to bottom the stairs seemed a great descent, and the dark hall archway through which they led made them all the more formidable. He put down a foot and drew it up again. Then he took hold of the overhead banister-rail, slid forward his weight on it, and began to descend.

Even so it felt safer to plant both feet upon every grade ; stairs had become unfamiliar things to him. Progressing thus in the flop-and-shuffle style of babyhood, he felt himself ridiculous when the sound of a footstep threatened to make him a spectacle. He loosed hold two steps from the end, tottered, and came floundering forward into the thick-haired rug below.

"All right!" he grumbled aloud, apprehensive of detection in so all wrong an attitude. But the alarm was false ; nobody came ; and the respite set him off upon his legs again. Across the hall toward the front door his boots made a big feeble clatter ; those ends of him had become noisy and too heavy for management ; they bumped his feet down at random, and seemed half-stuck to the ground before each step. That he had been ill all over for weeks, he remembered ; but only now when he tried to walk did he realise how ill his legs had been. All the house seemed to have been ill, too ; the coat-rack was emptied of its appendages, and through an open door he saw bare boards, lowered blinds, carpets rolled and stacked into a corner, and dust-sheets over the few large pieces of furniture that remained. The whole place—the hall, the staircase, and the banisters—smelt, as he did, of embrocations. Every sight that met his eye denied him recognition, mutilated his feelings, and decimated his affections ; and a