

but they don't talk to me, same as that there picture of Sarah's. Eh! poor girl! how she did like it! When she were as ill as ill, she put her eye on that picture, and never made no murmurs; and when she were dyin', she says to me, she says, 'George,' says she, 'I do believe as God is just like that.' And it were only a little bairn—the picture were—you know. Eh! dear, poor Sarah!"

And then from another group came other words: "I suppose they cost a heap of money, and lots of paint is in them. Well, we've seen the show; let's go and get something to drink." And one after another the groups shuffled and shambled out of the room. The artist sat still; he could not stir, he could not think; but something was working its way up to its brain; it would come into clearness before long. But for the present a numbness had fallen upon his mind and body: he could not initiate any movement of thought or action. He sat motionless and with vacant mind, till the opening of a distant door, followed by a clattering sound of voices and the trampling of coming feet, told him that the banquet was ended, and he had missed it all. He could not stay to meet the coming people. How could he explain his absence? How could he, in the present mood, meet them at all? He started up and, darting out at the smaller door, made his way through the curious crowd without, and hurried through the garlanded and decorated streets to his own house. He unlocked his studio door, and, as he did so, his eye fell upon the dust-covered and long-closed door of the secret cupboard. He awoke from his mental stupor. He produced the key; he flung open the door; he drew out those precious tokens of his early life. "I have been too long—too long away. I see it. I have not tasted of the river of true beauty for long—too long." And then he formed a resolve. He would ascend. He would drink once more of the spirit-invigorating river. He would return, and he would paint again the whole series of pictures for the council-chamber. Yes, he saw the meaning of his misgivings; he understood what the simple critics meant, and what they missed.

He bore his burden out of the town, and he climbed the most solitary hill, till he reached an open clearing among the trees on the summit. He sat down upon the trunk of a tree which had been newly felled. He unfolded the contents of his burden. How old they looked!

These winglets for his feet, how dim they seemed! The dull earth seemed to have dulled them. Once they shone like silver wings, and the feathers like gold. He gently brushed the wings to clear them of the dust; but it was impossible to revive their former brilliancy. But, perhaps, as he reached towards the higher realms, the purer atmosphere through which he must pass would revive their early beauty.

As he thought thus, he was trying to adjust the winglets to his ankles; but he seemed to have lost the art; he kept thinking how to do it. He argued to himself that it was just this thinking how to do it which hindered his doing it. If he would only not think, and just let natural habit and instinct have fair play, it would be all right. But though he tried to keep his mind passive, it was not all right. Then he examined the winglets and looked at his own feet—was he mistaken, or was it indeed true that now as he looked at them the winglets did not seem to be made for his feet. Much more slender and ethereal-made feet must they be to which those golden sandals must be bound. His own feet, as he looked at them, seemed gross, heavy, and large. It was clear that he could not wear the winglets. So he unfolded his great wings, thinking, "With these I can fly upwards. No doubt the journey will be longer and the guidance less certain without the ankle wings; but this I must endure."

But the wings were difficult of management, and he had now lost a great deal of time; the sun was sinking away to the west. It had fallen below the hilltops, and the dark trees around him cut off the warmth of its beams. He felt a fear about attempting his journey. Crippled as he was by the loss of the feet-feathers, he began to doubt the wisdom of starting just at nightfall. So, with a newborn panic in his heart, he gathered up his bundle once more, and made his way down the hillside, and entered the city in the second dusk. There was a silence at the gate and in the main streets of the city, but as he passed through some of the narrower streets he caught snatches of men's speech, and they sounded full of fear. Anxious faces were peering out of half-opened doors into the darkness as though they looked for some one now and again a man would pass him hurriedly. Slowly he pieced together the meaning of the silence and the stir. The plague, which long neglect had nursed in the purlieus of the city, had broken out.

Death was on the move with his cold hands, cleaning in his relentless fashion the dens of disease which men were too busy to cleanse. The artist put his burden back into the cupboard for the night, and, as he did so, he thought of the wings of death which were spread over the city, and of the wings of life and heaven which he had left so long unused. "To-morrow," said he, "to-morrow with the sunrise I must take my flight." With the sunrise he was on the hilltop again. The large wings, as he spread them out, seemed to have grown in size. After working for hours he managed to fasten them to his arms and shoulders. But he felt uneasy, their size made them unwieldy, and they were as an united burden on his back. He essayed to fly, but he had not the art of their movement; he could rise above the ground and whirl uncertainly round, entangling his wings in the highest branches of the field-trees, but he could not mount upwards, and in the efforts he made he beat off some of the feathers, and when some were loosened others began to give way, and every time he attempted flight feathers of various hues fell in profusion to the ground. And again the day was wearing away, and he grew tired and faint, and with the approaching sundown the fear once more took possession of him; so, after looking dolefully at the skeleton aspect of his once-beautiful wings, he gathered up his burden again and departed to the city and his house, and, being faint and weary, he slept; and in his sleep he dreamed.

CHAPTER IV.

The voices were the voices of heaven: the tender blue and the pure light were the hue and light of heaven: he saw and he heard, but he knew that he was not there. No; for he was far away. And though these sights and sounds were those of heaven, they were dimmed and distant, and yet most clear. And in his sleep, he felt—"It is all real, but all far off, and I am of heaven no more." But he had little time for thought; for he heard that wonderful voice, majestic as the sea, which thrills all creatures, even the highest in Heaven's order, with the power which makes them tremble and yearn—grow faint and get strong—full of fear and full of courage; and which sends into their innermost being a most unutterable tenderness, making them full of longing for His presence, and earnest desire to take the weakest and feeblest things into their embrace, for His sake.