

V.

THE FAIRY QUEEN.

I.

ALL the fun of the fair! Screaming sirens! Flaring lights! Three abreast, the statuesque horses, with their gilded chariots, rattle round and round and up and down in endless circles. Insistently, relentlessly, the steam orchestration grinds out "Home to Our Mountains." Lads and lasses hooch on the high-flies. Gipsy-looking men and women with strange anglicised accents invite one and all to "Walk up!" or "'Ave a go at the dollies!"

At the *geggie* "the last tune on the outside" is being played for the tenth time. The *ghost illusion* does roaring business; Mabel, the bare-legged clairvoyant, the big magnet. To-night's the night! To-morrow at dawn the cavalcade will vanish, dissolving like mist in a desert. Fun and frolic to-night! Even the *fat lady* is radiant as she turns round to exhibit her absence of *points*.

Nasally but rhythmically the man at the gaming-table shouts . . . "'Ere you are! we play wi' the men o' the day; we bar neither creed, colour, nor country; 'ere you are! the Prince of Wales' favourite game of roly-poly; 'ere you are! we play with soldier, sailor, tinkler, tailor, the man wot follows the plough; . . . one in . . . two in . . . three in . . . 'oo'll make four?" A gay scene, colour and light and life!

One there was who stood apart. She may have been pretty. It was hard to tell; her eyes were so red with

weeping, and the tear streams had left certain dark and disfiguring tidal marks on her plump cheeks. Peggy was her name.

She was crying for a lost penny, her only one. Pennies to Peggy were as rare as butterflies in winter. She had held it tightly in her hand all the way to the showground; and here, outside the *ghost illusion* she had lost it. In the crush she put up her hand to adjust her scarf, and the penny slipped to the ground. No use looking for it; she was swept along and out of sight before she could even try. It was an irreparable disaster. She edged out of the crowd and stood sobbing by the side of a caravan.

There was no fun in being at the shows without money . . . none. Not that the penny would take her far. But it did mean independence, and it made her part of that great tide of spendthrift humanity. Further, it enabled her to speculate as to what particular show she would deign to patronise. Without money she was simply a derelict, a hanger-on.

In her heart she knew the penny would ultimately have gone to the keeper of the hot-pea saloon. But as long as she possessed it she could turn up her little snub nose at habbie-horses, or high-flies, or anything. And so Peggy stood by the side of that caravan, weeping bitter tears.

II.

Tonio heard her as he was putting the last touch of grease paint to his super-smiling lips. A window opened in the caravan. Peggy looked up. The face of a clown grinned down at her. "Wot's the matter, Cinderella?" Tonio inquired.

“ Please—I’ve—I’ve—I’ve lost my—my—my penny,” whimpered Peggy. In a moment he had whipped out of the caravan and stood at her side.

Quick to understand and quick in action he lifted her on to his shoulders, and, with a whoop, dashed into the showground. “ Make way for the Fairy Queen!” he shouted.

Daring and irresistible he jumped on to the hobby-horses while they were going, holding Peggy securely on his shoulder. “ The Fairy Queen! The Fairy Queen!” Everyone looked. Round and round they went, Peggy waving her wee red hanky. From the horses to the high-flies, from the high-flies to the dollies. . . . “ The Fairy Queen! The Fairy Queen!” Then to the circus itself, where Tonio held her up proudly in front of the booth.

He spoke through a megaphone—“ Lydies and gentlemen,” he said, “ a great and hauspicious event ’as ’appened! This ’ere, wot you sees before your eyes, is the Fairy Queen. Alone I found ’er. I looks out the window of my ’otel bedroom, and there she was a-crying of ’er little ’eart out. I asks ’er wot’s the matter? Lydies and gentlemen, it transpires that the Fairy Queen ’as been an’ gone an’ lost ’er penny. Now, friends, I ’olds me ’at in me ’and; if yer wants to save your souls get into them pockets o’ yours an’ toss a copper this way. Every copper received will go straight to the Fairy Queen herself—thank you!—thank you!—thank you!—strike me blind, tenpence! Ten beautiful pennies!”

With a sweeping gesture he handed the money to Peggy, kissing her on both cheeks. She ran like a deer to the hot-pea saloon.

"Like 'em?" queried the waitress. The Fairy Queen did. She had more, and more, and then—just another.

When she rose to leave she could hardly walk. She felt tight all over. Everything seemed to be going round. She made for home as well as she could. Feeling sick, she went up a side street and sat on a doorstep. Her misery was terrible. Relief came at last, a blessed relief. But it was a rag of a Peggy that knocked at the house door.

"Whaur hae ye been?" asked her mother.

"Oot!" replied Peggy.

"I'll oot ye! Ye've been at thae shows, I ken; ye've a face on ye like a ghost; whit hae ye been eatin'?"

"Hot peas!" replied Peggy meekly. "I lost my penny, an' the clown at the circus gied me tenpence an' ca'd me the Fairy Queen."

"Fairy Queen! Fairy Queen! I'll fairy queen ye, I wull—filin' yer stomach wi' trash!"

From the cupboard the mother brought a bottle of castor oil. Filling a large tablespoon to overflowing, she said, "Swallow this, an' aff ye go to yer bed; come on, nane o' yer nonsense."

The oil gurgled and spluttered in the reluctant throat of the Fairy Queen. She grued and shivered even as she slipped into bed.

Later in the night her father came in. "That wean o' yours is hame frae the shows nearly deid: a clown gied her tenpence, an' she's baggit hersel' fu' o' hot peas and vinegar," said the mother.

"Guid wholesome diet!" replied the father.

“Wholesome blethers!” the mother continued; “just look at her lyin’ there, her face like a ghost.”

The father approached the bed. The Fairy Queen was asleep, her chubby wee face wreathed in a smile, her lips moving as in quiet speech. He bent down to catch her words. She broke into a little chuckling laugh as she turned her face to the wall and snuggled into the pillow.