

A Prisoner in Fairyland

By

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Chapter 1

Man is his own star; and the soul that can
Render an honest and a perfect man
Commands all light, all influence, all fate,
Nothing to him falls early, or too late.
Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

BEAUMONT AND FLETCHER.

Minks--Herbert Montmorency--was now something more than secretary, even than private secretary: he was confidential-private-secretary, adviser, friend; and this, more because he was a safe receptacle for his employer's enthusiasms than because his advice or judgment had any exceptional value. So many men need an audience. Herbert Minks was a fine audience, attentive, delicately responsive, sympathetic, understanding, and above all--silent. He did not leak. Also, his applause was wise without being noisy. Another rare quality he possessed was that he was honest as the sun. To prevaricate, even by gesture, or by saying nothing, which is the commonest form of untruth, was impossible to his transparent nature. He might hedge, but he could never lie. And he was 'friend,' so far as this was possible between employer and employed, because a pleasant relationship of years' standing had established a bond of mutual respect under conditions of business intimacy which often tend to destroy it.

Just now he was very important into the bargain, for he had a secret from his wife that he meant to divulge only at the proper moment. He had known it himself but a few hours. The leap from being secretary in one of Henry Rogers's companies to being that prominent gentleman's confidential private secretary was, of course, a very big one. He hugged it secretly at first alone. On the journey back from the City to the suburb where he lived, Minks made a sonnet on it. For his emotions invariably sought the safety valve of verse. It was a wiser safety valve for high spirits than horse-racing or betting on the football results, because he always stood to win, and never to lose. Occasionally he sold these bits of joy for half a guinea, his wife pasting the results neatly in a big press album from which he often read aloud on Sunday nights when the children were in bed. They were signed 'Montmorency Minks'; and bore evidence of occasional pencil corrections on the margin with a view to publication later in a volume. And sometimes there were little lyrical fragments too, in a wild, original metre, influenced by Shelley and yet entirely his own. These had special pages to themselves at the end of the big book. But usually he preferred the sonnet form; it was more sober, more dignified. And just now the bumping of the Tube train shaped his emotion into something that began with

Success that poisons many a baser mind

With thoughts of self, may lift--

but stopped there because, when he changed into another train, the jerkier movement altered the rhythm into something more lyrical, and he got somewhat confused between the two and ended by losing both.

He walked up the hill towards his tiny villa, hugging his secret and anticipating with endless detail how he would break it to his wife. He felt very proud and very happy. The half-mile trudge seemed like a few yards.

He was a slim, rather insignificant figure of a man, neatly dressed, the City clerk stamped plainly over all his person. He envied his employer's burly six-foot stature, but comforted himself always with the thought that he possessed in its place a certain delicacy that was more becoming to a man of letters whom an adverse fate prevented from being a regular minor poet. There was that touch of melancholy in his fastidious appearance that suggested the atmosphere of frustrated dreams. Only the firmness of his character and judgment decreed against the luxury of longish hair; and he prided himself upon remembering that although a poet at heart, he was outwardly a City clerk and, as a strong man, must permit no foolish compromise.

His face on the whole was pleasing, and rather soft, yet, owing to this warring of opposing inner forces, it was at the same time curiously deceptive. Out of that dreamy, vague expression shot, when least expected, the hard and practical judgment of the City--or vice versa. But the whole was gentle--admirable quality for an audience, since it invited confession and assured a gentle hearing. No harshness lay there. Herbert Minks might have been a fine, successful mother perhaps. The one drawback to the physiognomy was that the mild blue eyes were never quite united in their frank gaze. He squinted pleasantly, though his wife told him it was a fascinating cast rather than an actual squint. The chin, too, ran away a little from the mouth, and the lips were usually parted. There was, at any rate, this air of incompatibility of temperament between the features which, made all claim to good looks out of the question.

That runaway chin, however, was again deceptive. It did, indeed run off, but the want of decision it gave to the countenance seemed contradicted by the prominent forehead and straight eyebrows, heavily marked. Minks knew his mind. If sometimes evasive rather than outspoken, he could on occasion be surprisingly firm. He saw life very clearly. He could certainly claim the good judgment stupid people sometimes have, due perhaps to their inability to see alternatives-- just as some men's claim to greatness is born of an audacity due to their total lack of humour.

Minks was one of those rare beings who may be counted on--a quality better than mere brains, being of the heart. And Henry Rogers understood him and read him like an open book. Preferring the steady devotion to the brilliance a high salary may buy, he had watched him for many years in every sort of circumstance. He had, by degrees, here and there, shown an interest in his life. He had chosen his private secretary well. With Herbert Minks at his side he might accomplish many things his heart was set upon. And while Minks bumped down in his third-class crowded carriage to Sydenham, hunting his evasive sonnet, Henry Rogers glided swiftly in a taxi-cab to his rooms in St. James's Street, hard on the trail of another dream that seemed, equally, to keep just beyond his actual reach.

It would certainly seem that thought can travel across space between minds sympathetically in tune, for just as the secretary put his latch-key into his shiny

blue door the idea flashed through him, 'I wonder what Mr. Rogers will do, now that he's got his leisure, with a fortune and--me!' And at the same moment Rogers, in his deep arm-chair before the fire, was saying to himself, 'I'm glad Minks has come to me; he's just the man I want for my big Scheme!' And then--'Pity he's such a lugubrious looking fellow, and wears those dreadful fancy waistcoats. But he's very open to suggestion. We can change all that. I must look after Minks a bit. He's rather sacrificed his career for me, I fancy. He's got high aims. Poor little Minks!'

'I'll stand by him whatever happens,' was the thought the slamming of the blue door interrupted. 'To be secretary to such a man is already success.' And again he hugged his secret and himself.

As already said, the new-fledged secretary was married and wrote poetry on the sly. He had four children. He would make an ideal helpmate, worshipping his employer with that rare quality of being interested in his ideas and aims beyond the mere earning of a salary; seeing, too, in that employer more than he, the latter, supposed. For, while he wrote verses on the sly, 'my chief,' as he now preferred to call him, lived poetry in his life.

'He's got it, you know, my dear,' he announced to his wife, as he kissed her and arranged his tie in the gilt mirror over the plush mantelpiece in the 'parlour'; 'he's got the divine thing in him right enough; got it, too, as strong as hunger or any other natural instinct. It's almost functional with him, if I may say so'--which meant 'if you can understand me'--'only, he's deliberately smothered it all these years. He thinks it wouldn't go down with other business men. And he's been in business, you see, from the word go. He meant to make money, and he couldn't do both exactly. Just like myself---'

Minks wandered on. His wife noticed the new enthusiasm in his manner, and was puzzled by it. Something was up, she divined.

'Do you think he'll raise your salary again soon?' she asked practically, helping him draw off the paper cuffs that protected his shirt from ink stains, and throwing them in the fire. 'That seems to be the real point.'

But Herbert evaded the immediate issue. It was so delightful to watch her and keep his secret a little longer.

'And you do deserve success, dear,' she added; 'you've been as faithful as a horse.' She came closer, and stroked his thick, light hair a moment.

He turned quickly. Had he betrayed himself already? Had she read it from his eyes or manner?

'That's nothing,' he answered lightly. 'Duty is duty.'

'Of course, dear,' and she brought him his slippers. He would not let her put them on for him. It was not gallant to permit menial services to a woman.

'Success,' he murmured, 'that poisons many a baser mind---' and then stopped short. 'I've got a new sonnet,' he told her quickly, determined to prolong his pleasure, 'got it in the train coming home. Wait a moment, and I'll give you the rest. It's a beauty, with real passion in it, only I want to keep it cold and splendid if I can. Don't interrupt a moment.' He put the slippers on the wrong feet and stared hard into the fire.

Then Mrs. Minks knew for a certainty that something had happened. He had not even asked after the children.

'Herbert,' she said, with a growing excitement, 'why are you so full of poetry to-night? And what's this about success and poison all of a sudden?' She knew he never drank. 'I believe Mr. Rogers has raised your salary, or done one of those fine things you always say he's going to do. Tell me, dear, please tell me.' There were new, unpaid bills in her pocket, and she almost felt tempted to show them. She poked the fire fussily.

'Albinia,' he answered importantly, with an expression that brought the chin up closer to the lips, and made the eyebrows almost stern, 'Mr. Rogers will do the right thing always--when the right time comes. As a matter of fact'--here he reverted to the former train of thought --'both he and I are misfits in a practical, sordid age. We should have been born in Greece---'

'I simply love your poems, Herbert,' she interrupted gently, wondering how she managed to conceal her growing impatience so well, 'but there's not the money in them that there ought to be, and they don't pay for coals or for Ronald's flannels---'

'Albinia,' he put in softly, 'they relieve the heart, and so make me a happier and a better man. But--I should say he would,' he added, answering her distant question about the salary.

The secret was almost out. It hung on the edge of his lips. A moment longer he hugged it deliciously. He loved these little conversations with his wife. Never a shade of asperity entered into them. And this one in particular afforded him a peculiar delight.

'Both of us are made for higher things than mere money-making,' he went on, lighting his calabash pipe and puffing the smoke carefully above her head from one corner of his mouth, 'and that's what first attracted us to each other, as I have often mentioned to you. But now'--his bursting heart breaking through all control--'that he has sold his interests to a company and retired into private life--er--my own existence should be easier and less exacting. I shall have less routine, be more my own master, and also, I trust, find time perhaps for---'

'Then something has happened!' cried Mrs. Minks, springing to her feet.

'It has, my dear,' he answered with forced calmness, though his voice was near the trembling point.

She stood in front of him, waiting. But he himself did not rise, nor show more feeling than he could help. His poems were full of scenes like this in which the men--strong, silent fellows--were fine and quiet. Yet his instinct was to act quite otherwise. One eye certainly betrayed it.

'It has,' he repeated, full of delicious emotion.

'Oh, but Herbert---!'

'And I am no longer that impersonal factor in City life, mere secretary to the Board of a company---'

'Oh, Bertie, dear!'

'But private secretary to Mr. Henry Rogers--private and confidential secretary at--'

'Bert, darling---!'

'At 300 pounds a year, paid quarterly, with expenses extra, and long, regular holidays,' he concluded with admirable dignity and self-possession.

There was a moment's silence.

'You splendour!' She gave a little gasp of admiration that went straight to his heart, and set big fires alight there. 'Your reward has come at last! My hero!'

This was as it should be. The beginning of an epic poem flashed with tumult through his blood. Yet outwardly he kept his admirable calm.

'My dear, we must take success, like disaster, quietly.' He said it gently, as when he played with the children. It was mostly put on, of course, this false grandiloquence of the prig. His eyes already twinkled more than he could quite disguise.

'Then we can manage the other school, perhaps, for Frank?' she cried, and was about to open various flood-gates when he stopped her with a look of proud happiness that broke down all barriers of further pretended secrecy.

'Mr. Rogers,' was the low reply, 'has offered to do that for us--as a start.' The words were leisurely spoken between great puffs of smoke. 'That's what I meant just now by saying that he lived poetry in his life, you see. Another time you will allow judgment to wait on knowledge---'

'You dear old humbug,' she cried, cutting short the sentence that neither of them quite understood, 'I believe you've known this for weeks---'

'Two hours ago exactly,' he corrected her, and would willingly have prolonged the scene indefinitely had not his practical better half prevented him. For she came over, dropped upon her knees beside his chair, and, putting both arms about his neck, she kissed his foolish sentences away with all the pride and tenderness that filled her to the brim. And it pleased Minks hugely. It made him feel, for the moment at any rate, that he was the hero, not Mr. Henry Rogers.

But he did not show his emotion much. He did not even take his pipe out. It slipped down sideways into another corner of his wandering lips. And, while he returned the kiss with equal tenderness and pleasure, one mild blue eye looked down upon her soft brown hair, and the other glanced sideways, without a trace of meaning in it, at the oleograph of Napoleon on Elba that hung upon the wall. ... Soon afterwards the little Sydenham villa was barred and shuttered, the four children were sound asleep, Herbert and Albinia Minks both lost in the world of happy dreams that sometimes visit honest, simple folk whose consciences are clean and whose aims in life are commonplace but worthy.

Chapter 2

When the creation was new and all the stars shone in their first splendour, the gods held their assembly in the sky and sang 'Oh, the picture of perfection! the joy unalloyed!'

But one cried of a sudden--'It seems that somewhere there is a break in the chain of light and one of the stars has been lost.'

The golden string of their harp snapped, their song stopped, and they cried in dismay--'Yes, that lost star was the best, she was the glory of all heavens!'

From that day the search is unceasing for her, and the cry goes on from one to the other that in her the world has lost its one joy!

Only in the deepest silence of night the stars smile and whisper among themselves--'Vain is this seeking! Unbroken perfection is over all!'

RABINDRANATH TAGORE. (Prose translation by Author from his original Bengali.)

It was April 30th and Henry Rogers sat in his rooms after breakfast, listening to the rumble of the traffic down St. James's Street, and found the morning dull. A pile of letters lay unopened upon the table, waiting the arrival of the discriminating Mr. Minks with his shorthand note-book and his mild blue eyes. It was half-past nine, and the secretary was due at ten o'clock.

He smiled as he thought of this excellent fellow's first morning in the promoted capacity of private secretary. He would come in very softly, one eye looking more intelligent than the other; the air of the City clerk discarded, and in its place the bearing that belonged to new robes of office worn for the first time. He would bow, say 'Good morning, Mr. Rogers,' glance round with one eye on his employer and another on a possible chair, seat himself with a sigh that meant 'I have written a new poem in the night, and would love to read it to you if I dared,' then flatten out his oblong note-book and look up, expectant and receptive. Rogers would say 'Good morning, Mr. Minks. We've got a busy day before us. Now, let me see---' and would meet his glance with welcome. He would look quickly from one eye to the other- to this day he did not know which one was right to meet-and would wonder for the thousandth time how such an insignificant face could go with such an honest, capable mind. Then he smiled again as he remembered Frank, the little boy whose schooling he was paying for, and realised that Minks would bring a message of gratitude from Mrs. Minks, perhaps would hand him, with a gesture combining dignity and humbleness, a little note of thanks in a long narrow envelope of pale mauve, bearing a flourishing monogram on its back.

And Rogers scowled a little as he thought of the air of gruffness he would assume while accepting it, saying as pleasantly as he could manage, 'Oh, Mr. Minks, that's nothing at all; I'm only too delighted to be of service to the lad.' For he abhorred the expression of emotion, and his delicate sense of tact would make pretence of helping the boy himself, rather than the struggling parents.

Au fond he had a genuine admiration for Minks, and there was something lofty in the queer personality that he both envied and respected. It made him rely upon his judgment in certain ways he could not quite define. Minks seemed devoid of personal ambition in a sense that was not weakness. He was not insensible to the importance of money, nor neglectful of chances that enabled him to do well by his wife and family, but--he was after other things as well, if not chiefly. With a childlike sense of honesty he had once refused a position in a company that was not all it should have been, and the high pay thus rejected pointed to a scrupulous nicety of view that the City, of course, deemed foolishness. And Rogers, aware of this, had taken to him, seeking as it were to make this loss good to him in legitimate ways. Also the fellow belonged to leagues and armies and 'things,' quixotic some of them, that tried to lift humanity. That is, he gave of his spare time, as also of his spare money, to help. His Saturday evenings, sometimes a whole bank holiday, he devoted to the welfare of others, even though the devotion Rogers thought misdirected.

For Minks hung upon the fringe of that very modern, new-fashioned, but almost freakish army that worships old, old ideals, yet insists upon new-fangled names for them. Christ, doubtless, was his model, but it must be a Christ properly and freshly labelled; his Christianity must somewhere include the prefix 'neo,' and the word 'scientific' must also be dragged in if possible before he was satisfied. Minks, indeed, took so long explaining to himself the wonderful title that he was sometimes in danger of forgetting the brilliant truths it so vulgarly concealed. Yet never quite concealed. He must be up-to-date, that was all. His attitude to the world scraped acquaintance with nobility somewhere. His gift was a rare one. Out of so little, he gave his mite, and gave it simply, unaware that he was doing anything unusual.

This attitude of mind had made him valuable, even endeared him, to the successful business man, and in his secret heart Rogers had once or twice felt ashamed of himself. Minks, as it were, knew actual achievement because he was, forcedly, content with little, whereas he, Rogers, dreamed of so much, yet took twenty years to come within reach of what he dreamed. He was always waiting for the right moment to begin.

His reflections were interrupted by the sunlight, which, pouring in a flood across the opposite roof, just then dropped a patch of soft April glory upon the black and yellow check of his carpet slippers. Rogers got up and, opening the window wider than before, put out his head. The sunshine caught him full in the face. He tasted the fresh morning air. Tinged with the sharp sweetness of the north it had a fragrance as of fields and gardens. Even St. James's Street could not smother its vitality and perfume. He drew it with delight into his lungs, making such a to-do about it that a passer-by looked up to see what was the matter, and noticing the hanging tassel of a flamboyant dressing-gown, at once modestly lowered his eyes again.

But Henry Rogers did not see the passer-by in whose delicate mind a point of taste had thus vanquished curiosity, for his thoughts had flown far across the pale-blue sky, behind the cannon-ball clouds, up into that scented space and distance where summer was already winging her radiant way towards the earth.

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