



Author of "A Dreamer's Tale," etc.

EPISODE XII.—MISS CUBBIDGE AND THE DRAGON OF ROMANCE.

LITTLE upon her eighteenth birthday thought Miss Cubbidge, of No. 12A, Prince of Wales's Square, that before another year had gone its way she would lose the sight of that unshapely oblong that was so long her home. And had you told her, further, that within that year all trace of that so-called square and of the day when her father was elected by a thumping majority to share in the guidance of the destinies of the Empire should utterly fade from her memory, she would merely have said in that affected voice of hers, "Go to."

There was nothing about it in the daily Press, the policy of her father's party had no provision for it, there was no hint of it in conversation at evening parties to which Miss Cubbidge went: there was nothing to warn her at all that a loathsome dragon with golden scales that rattled as he went should have come up clean out of the prime of romance and gone by night (so far as we know) through Hammersmith and come to Ardle Mansions, and then have turned to his left, which, of course, brought him to Miss Cubbidge's father's house.

There sat Miss Cubbidge at evening on her balcony, quite alone, waiting for her father to be made a baronet. She was wearing walking-boots and a hat and a low-necked evening-dress, for a painter was but just now painting her portrait, and neither she nor the painter saw anything odd in the strange combination. She did not notice the roar of the dragon's golden scales, nor distinguish above the manifold lights of London the small red glare of his eyes. He suddenly lifted his head, a blaze of gold, over the balcony; he did not appear a yellow dragon then, for his glistening scales reflected the beauty that London puts upon her only at evening and night. She screamed, but to no knight, nor knew what knight to call on, nor guessed where were the dragon's overthrowers of far, romantic days, nor what mightier game they chased or what wars they waged: perchance they were busy even then arming for Armageddon.

Out of the balcony of her father's house in Prince of Wales's Square, the painted dark-green balcony that grew blacker every year, the dragon lifted Miss Cubbidge and spread his rattling wings, and London fell away like an old fashion. And England fell away, and the smoke of its factories, and the round material world that goes humming round the sun vexed and pursued by time, until there appeared the eternal and ancient lands of Romance lying low by mystical seas.

You had not pictured Miss Cubbidge stroking the golden head of one of the dragons of song, with one hand idly, while with the other she sometimes played with pearls brought up from lonely places of the sea. They filled huge haliotis shells with pearls and laid them there beside her; they brought her emeralds which she set to flash among the tresses of her long black hair; they brought her threaded sapphires for her cloak: all this the princes of fable did and the elves and the gnomes of myth. And partly she still lived, and partly she was one with long ago, and with those sacred tales that nurses tell, when all their children are good and evening has come, and the fire is burning well, and the soft pat-pat of the snowflakes on the pane is like the furtive tread of fearful things in old, enchanted woods. If at first she missed those daily novelties among which she was reared, the old sufficient song of the mystical sea singing of faery-lore at first soothed, and at last consoled her.

Even she forgot those advertisements of pills that are so dear to England; even she forgot political cant and the things that one discusses and the things that one does not, and had perforce to content herself with seeing, sailing by, huge gold-laden galleons with treasure for Madrid, and the merry skull-and-crossbones of the pirates, and the tiny nautilus setting out to sea, and ships of heroes trafficking in romance, or of princes seeking for enchanted isles.

It was not by chains that the dragon kept her there, but by one of the spells of old. To one to whom the facilities of the daily Press had for so long been accorded, spells would have palled—you would have said—and galleons after a time, and all things out of date. After a time. But whether the centuries passed her, or whether the years, or whether no time at all, she did not know. If anything indicated the passing of time, it was the rhythm of elfin horns blowing upon the heights. If the centuries went by her, the spell that bound her gave her also perennial youth, and kept alight for ever the lantern by her side, and saved from decay the marble palace facing the mystical sea. And if no time went by her there at all, her single moment on those marvellous coasts was turned, as it were, to a crystal reflecting a thousand scenes. If it was all a dream, it was a dream that knew no morning and no fading away. The tide roamed on, and whispered of mystery and of myth; while near that captive lady, asleep in his marble tank, the golden dragon dreamed; and a little way out from the coast all that the dragon dreamed showed faintly in the mist that lay over the sea. He never dreamed of any rescuing knight. So long as he dreamed it was twilight; but when he came up nimbly out of his tank night fell and starlight glistened on the dripping, golden scales.

There he and his captive either defeated Time or never encountered him at all; while, in the world we know, raged Roncesvalles or battles yet to be—I know not to what part of the shore of Romance he bore her. Perhaps she became one of those princesses of whom fable loves to tell; but let it suffice that there she lived by the sea: and kings ruled, and Demos ruled, and kings came again, and many cities returned to their native dust; and still she abided there, and still her marble palace passed not away, nor the power that there was in the dragon's spell.

And only once did there ever come to her a message from the world that of old she knew—it came in a pearly ship across the mystical sea; it was from an old school friend that she had had in Putney, merely a note, no more, in a little, neat, round hand: it said, "It is not Proper for you to be there alone."

[Here the twelfth episode of the "Book of Wonder" endeth, and here the relating of the Chronicles of Little Adventures at the Edge of the World. I take farewell of my readers. But it may be we shall even meet again, for it is still to be told how the gnomes robbed the fairies, and of the vengeance that the fairies took, and how even the gods themselves were troubled thereby in their sleep; and how the King of Ool insulted the troubadours, thinking himself safe among his scores of archers and hundreds of halberdiers, and how the troubadours stole to his towers by night, and under his battlements by the light of the moon made that king ridiculous for ever in song. But for this I must first return to the Edge of the World. Behold, the caravans start.]

