



BY MAUD STEPNEY RAWSON.

**D**OWN in the great fountain basin of the mountains, with their fine crystal needie-points for its rim, and their million snow rills taking impetuous and sibilant course to its depths, lay the lake, the gem of all the lakes of a certain little kingdom. Others there were, larger than this one, all fringed with villages or marked by towns; but this one had the deepest colour, though only the poorest hamlets clustered here and there at its edge. The deepest in colour, the most changeful in surface, it was the one most tenderly protected from the north by the mountains, which guarded it as warriors guard a sleeping queen. The largest city of the little kingdom was not so very far away, as the crow flies, but the road to the lake was sufficiently rough to keep the ordinary townfolk away. Sometimes, however, they made inquisitive inroad, and the lake people wondered at them, and went about their fishing and harvesting, their boat-building and fruit-selling with an air of proud aloofness.

The spring was clinging to its last days of empire, and anemones vied bravely with the buds of roses, which in two days would cast all other flowers into the shade. The sun was mounting higher, and the surface of the lake shimmered. Upon a narrow strip of white marble beach Pepita knelt, wringing out linen. The sun beat upon her strong young neck, and her blue-black hair, knotted almost on the top

of her head, was loosened about her forehead in little curling wisps. Her red linen dress was pinned up round her hips, showing a short blue petticoat and bare feet and ankles. Her sleeves were rolled back, and the muscles of her round tanned arms were tense, for what she wrung she wrung mightily. A woman of her own type, but older, went along the path just above the strip of white beach, and paused to gossip.

"Such a thing, Pepita!" she called: "my husband, who went down to the town market last night with our melons, says the King is lost! He has been lost for two whole days. Some say it's a plot, and others that he has done it for fun, because he wanted to try something new; and some think he may simply have done it to spy upon us all. What do you think, Pepita?"

"Fuff!" answered Pepita; "I am sure it's all nonsense. Why, a king can't be lost! As to a plot, who wants to trouble to get rid of him? He's just a pretty doll—that's what my future husband says. None of the men fear him, and luckily he can't get into the way of us women, so I really don't see why we need trouble."

"But the other countries—that's what *my* man says—the other countries all round will all want to have a little bite out of us, and we shan't be a kingdom any more."

"Fuff!" said Pepita; "it won't matter

a bit—you and I will always have to go on washing and working, whether people take little bits out of us or not."

A young man, in the dress of a mountaineer, who also followed the path by the lake, paused to listen to the two women. The elder nodded to him, and said, "I suppose you haven't heard the news, young man?"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Pepita, lifting up her head to look.

"Isn't it quite true?" persisted the gossip.

"Perfectly," said the young mountaineer gravely. "Are they very much upset in the town?"

"The papers are full of it. . . . But there. . . . I have hens to feed, and you'd rather talk to Pepita, I know." And with the roguish glance of the matchmaker, the pretty matron pursued her way to the hamlet.

Pepita went to her basket, took out a fresh heap of crumpled linen, and rearranged her little wooden platform noisily at the water's edge ere she knelt down upon it for her laundry work.

The young man stepped on to the beach and threw himself down comfortably upon the warm white pebbles, resting his chin on his hands.

"The King really is gone," he said impressively.

"Rubbish!" said Pepita.

"Not 'rubbish!'" retorted the young man.

"Yes, *rubbish!* Why, what do you call this?" Pepita flourished a drenched linen garment at him.

"I really couldn't say," said the young man, embarrassed. "There are things called—er. . . . tea. . . . jackets, I believe. . . ."

"You big silly! . . . Shirts, shirts—look at them—twenty-one shirts, King's shirts!"

"Nonsense!"

"Look for yourself. Oh! you needn't think yourself so grand. I wash for the King. If it weren't for me he *would* look a scamp. A little bit of starch, good bleaching, good ironing—they turn a tramp into a swell at once."

The stranger examined a corner of the linen inquisitively. A curious expression flitted across his face, and the girl caught it just as she looked up from her work.

"Humph!" she said defiantly. "There it is as large as life. The lion and the

crown, and the olive wreath round them both."

"That is quite right," said the stranger: "the lion for strength, the crown for authority, and the olive garland for plenty and prosperity."

"It's silly," scoffed the girl, "and sillier still to stitch it all into this linen. I am sick of the sight of it, especially the plenty and prosperity part. He does not share it with *us!*"

"He was said to be charitable."

"Fuff! He rode by one day, when I and my young man were in the market buying me some earrings. The King passed us, throwing money to the market people. My old aunt, who was there, shrieked to us to scramble with the rest for the coins. But I held my lover tightly by the wrist, and would not let him stoop. That's not the way for a king to help his people. It's like flinging a bit of sugar down for a faithful mule because you're afraid it will bite your palm. 'Take it or leave it'—that's what he seemed to be saying with his eyes all the time. I left it."

Down went her head again, and she returned to her lathering. The young man's face had grown crimson.

"How would you have had him do it, then?"

"Why, come and talk to us, and see what we needed. We don't want coins thrown at us like sugar eggs at Easter."

"Ah! If some one had only told him! But now he is lost, what is to be done?"

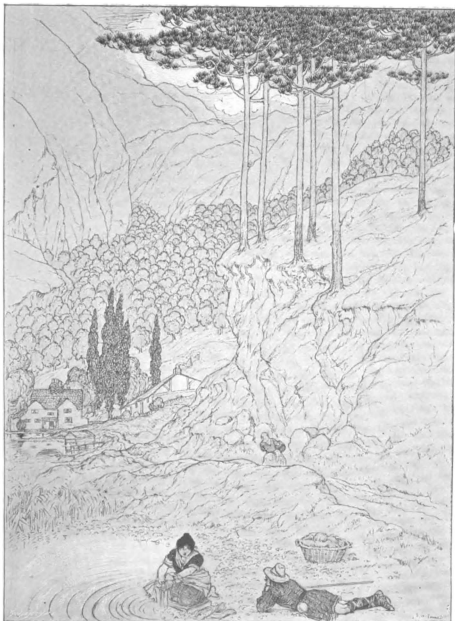
"Lost!" Pepita threw herself back on her heels, as she knelt, in fits of laughter. "Lost? Hear him! Look at this, and this, and this!" Her arms plunged into the water, and she half-raised the linen she was washing and doused it, and raised it and doused it again with the curious smulching sound of a wet fabric half inflated by air. "Do you think if a man is going to disappear for good he sends twenty-one of these rags—that's three per day—to the wash, with a ruder note to say that the gauffring of the last was very bad?"

"The dickens he did!"

"Young man, you don't seem to believe me. I'll show you the note from his chief valet: it is in my pocket. Have you a handkerchief?"

"At your service."

"Don't flourish so. Thank you. It's a nice thing to dry the hands upon.



*"The young man stepped on to the beach and threw himself down comfortably upon the warm white pebbles, resting his chin on his hands."*

*After a drawing by S. H. Sims.*

Don't be afraid—I'll wash it for you afterwards. Why . . .” She pounced upon the olive wreath emblem in the corner.

The young man coloured slightly. “Yes?”

“You've no right to this, young man.”

“The King gave it me. It's mine. I'm—a great friend of his.”

She rose and surveyed him from head to foot. “H'm! I knew you weren't a real mountain man, in spite of your old clothes. Out with it!”

Her acquaintance smiled. “You see, I don't want to wear my proper dress for fear of being talked to about the King. It . . . teases me. If he chooses to disappear, I really don't see why I should be troubled. I knew him very well, and I promised that if I were to hear anything extraordinary—like this—about him, I would keep out of the way. I should like to live up here. It is so beautiful, and you are so amusing.”

The girl flushed this time; she began to roll down her sleeves, then rolled them up awkwardly.

“There's a piece of your hair coming down,” said the stranger. “No, please don't”—for Pepita had made a grab at it—“it looks perfectly splendid in the sun. I've seen lots of beautifully dressed women, but none who”—Pepita's fingers instantly seized the coil and began to twist it up as if it had been a piece of wire—“none who could ever stand bareheaded in the sunlight like you, and look so magnificent,” concluded the mountaineer.

“And amusing?” queried Pepita flippantly. She mumbled it, because her teeth were holding a large tortoiseshell hairpin until her coils were ready to receive it.

“And amusing,” answered her companion. “But the others are amusing too.”

“How?”

“Oh, well . . . you wouldn't like them, I'm afraid.”

“They're just the King's sort, I suppose,” she remarked ironically, as she rammed the hairpin into position.

“Certainly not,” dissented the stranger sharply. “He detests them.”

“Why doesn't he banish them, then? Then there would be room for the good nice people.”

“He cannot. They are the people

among whom he was brought up: they and their husbands and mothers and fathers and kin.”

“Do you mean to say he can't turn them out of the place?”

“It is impossible.”

“Poor little silly! No wonder he has disappeared. He must have done it to get away from them, because he hadn't the courage to put his foot on them.”

“Ah! I wonder!”

“Wonder, indeed! You know him, and you can't deny that's the real truth. He is a born coward. I've always said so to my Francis—that is the boatman whom I shall marry some day. We fight over it pretty often when Francis says he can't get on in his work, and I tell him to go and ask the King to take him as one of his boatmen. Francis always says he cannot go to the King. ‘Nonsense!’ I say; ‘of course you can.’ ‘If I did,’ he says, ‘the King would never trouble to see me. If he did, other people would be angry and jealous, and he would have to hold an audience for beggars every day.’ So all that happens is that Francis sends in his name on a long list to the chamberlain, who doesn't read it, but gives it back to his clerks, and the clerks give it to the steward, and the steward does exactly as he likes. You know what that means. He gives the work to the men who pay him the most for getting it.”

“But still the King isn't a coward,” objected the young man.

“What else? He is afraid of his own chamberlain, afraid to be worried by the poverty of his real subjects.”

“That's a fib,” said her acquaintance, springing to his feet.

“Don't get excited now; the sun is very warm. I am quite right. Moreover, the King is terribly afraid of exciting jealousy and intrigue—he is a little, craven-hearted—”

“Stop!” he cried. “I will *not* have him abused.” He stood facing Pepita with flashing eyes. “He has a life of snares and pitfalls of which you know nothing.”

“All the more reason for him to be brave. There's every chance of his being well praised for it, at least, and it would give us, his real subjects”—Pepita touched with her brown forefinger the white kerchief knotted over her shoulders—“some chance of respecting him.”

Then she went down upon her knees

afresh to her wringing, piled up the linen, and finally looked round in challenge. "You've wasted a lot of my morning, so you'd better help me lay out this washing, young man."

He moved towards her, colouring awkwardly, and said, "With pleasure."

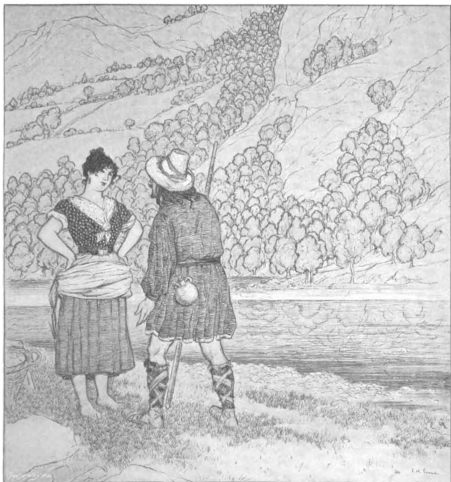
"Take one end of the basket, then, and help me on to the bank."

one little ghost of him, one inside each of these! I'd talk to him like a mother, and then I'd box his ears."

"I wonder which he would mind most," ventured the stranger.

"Which do you think?" retorted the girl. "You know him so well that you can tell best."

"I should think the box on the ears."



"He stood facing Pepita with flashing eyes."

*After a drawing by S. H. Sims.*

He did so, and meekly imitated her as she laid out the garments in the sun on the green slope, weighting them at the corners with the marble pebbles.

When it was all done she stood with her arms akimbo, and laughed. "Just look at them—funny little minnikin garments, all of fine lawn, like a woman's. Fuff! I wish I had him here—twenty-

"H'm. You haven't heard me talk like a mother. Francis has: he is a wiser man now."

"I should like to be wise also. Tell me exactly what you would say to the King if he were here."

"And then you'll repeat it to him?"

"Not if you . . . I mean I cannot. You see, he is lost."

"But you say you're his greatest friend."

"I even sit for his pictures."

"The little lazy drone! I wonder if he is too lazy to eat his dinner, too!"

The stranger shrugged his shoulders, and said, "I am waiting: please begin."

"I'd rather have said it straight to him."

"Never mind. I shall forget nothing, so that if I ever meet him he shall know it all."

"That's something. . . . Well, what I say is this: 'Your Majesty, you're the biggest coward of your nation, and if it weren't for your crown I don't know what else could hide from you the truth. They say you are a good young man, often dreadfully tempted to do all sorts of bad things. Your Majesty, I am tempted too, and so is Francis, and so is my sister-in-law, and my lame aunt with St. Vitus' dance, and the whole lot of us lake people; but there is no one to snivel over us, and say we are 'dreadfully tempted,' or to feel for us when we sin as if we had measles, or fever, or some disease which we don't deserve. All that is said of us is that we have the seed of wickedness in our hearts and are miserable sinners, and that the path of good life is hard and narrow. But your Majesty knows perfectly well that it is much harder to be good when life is a constant struggle to live decently on nothing, and to think pure thoughts with an empty cupboard and a had harvest or poor boat season. We do not know you, therefore we cannot be expected to love you. But all we ask is that you should help first those who really need it, and not those of whom you are afraid. If I were you, Sire, I would get up one morning, and call out those good-for-nothing people, and say, 'Clear out, the whole pack of you! Get out of my house and my garden and my country—I've no room for the likes of you.'

"And suppose I . . . I mean suppose the King did this, what next?"

"Oh, *then* he could begin to be a king and a man—work for his bread."

"But he slaves as it is. He opens great institutions, he eats all sorts of dinners to please great bodies of powerful people, he has to shake hands with creatures his soul despises."

"Fuff! That's not a man's work. He has to go about and see his country, like

a farmer who looks into every corner of his land to see that it is rich and good and fruitful—not like a wretched overseer who rides through once in ten years to terrify the slaves under him." She paused a moment to put a flower in her kerchief, and went on: "And he should set aside hours when he would see people who needed work and justice. There's my Francis now: the man who got the place he wanted is such a fool that his boats leak, and he has to come to Francis to patch them up. It's Francis who gets a few pence for doing the real work, and the other man gets pounds, and a grand official title—'King's Boatman of the Private Lake.' Fuff! I am sick of it all. There's nothing to do but wash and wash and wash all your life, whether you marry or whether you stay single, till your face is like a piece of leather and your hands as thick as the bark of a birch-tree."

"But there is good Francis to keep you."

"Francis, poor lamb? He can only just keep himself. It's no good talking. He won't go straight to the King, and say, 'Sire, I patched the boats, or you would be drowned any day in the middle of all your beautiful and wicked friends.' Francis hasn't the courage. That's what comes of having a King who hasn't courage either. Every decent man under him has no pluck. You are all the same."

"Thank you. Is that the end of your 'mother's talk'?"

"There's nothing left to say. It always ends with that—the minnikin King."

"You've forgotten something."

"The girl raised her eyebrows."

"The salute on the ears."

She laughed satirically in reply. "If you were my king there would be some sense in it. But as you aren't, why should I trouble? My hands tingle enough as it is, with all that blessed scrubbing."

The stranger rose to his full height and approached so close that her skirts almost brushed him. "I *am* the king," he said softly.

She started, became conscious of her bare feet and upturned sleeves, and recoiled a few paces. The satirical line about her red lip deepened. "Fuff!" she said scornfully.

The stranger unfastened the vest of his

shabby green mountaineer's jacket. In gold thread on white satin the olive wreath, with its in-set symbols, glamed out. The wearer of it smiled. "Afraid, Pepita? The King has more courage than you bargained for."

For five seconds she stood in her startled attitude, her eyes dilating, her heart beating, but her full mouth relaxed its scorn not the fraction of an inch. Then the reiteration of that taunting "Afraid, Pepita?" took her by the throat. She advanced swiftly, raised first one hand and then the other. . . . There was a double report, and then like a deer she began to scale the green slope towards a cottage buried in orchards, sobbing tearlessly as she climbed. Out of the bushes by the path emerged a man carrying a pair of oars, who put out his arm to stop her.

"Why, Pepita," he cried—"what's this?" Then his eye caught sight of the figure of the man below.

"Stop her—that's right. Stop her!" called the stranger. "She's running away from me. She has been so unkind."

"The dickens!" said Francis angrily. "Of course she has. What else do you expect, you—"

But the stranger had tossed aside the shabby green belted coat, and upon the boatman shone the symbol of his identity.

"The King is found," laughed the ex-mountaineer. "In the town they are offering a great reward to the finder. Pepita must claim it. She has done a great deal more than that, my good fellow. She has helped the king to find his courage. Eh, Pepita?"

"Curtsey!" whispered her lover, dragging her down to the path.

"What's the use, when I've boxed his ears?" she sobbed back.

"Come, friends, we will go down to the town and show ourselves," said his majesty.

"If Pepita may get her stockings and shoes first, sire. . . ."

The girl dragged her hand out of the grip of her lover, and made the lowest curtsey that is possible with a petticoat which betrays bare ankles.

"And who is to finish your majesty's shirts?" she faltered. "I am only a poor lavender, sire, but I take pride in my work. The linen is fine—it dries all too quickly. . . ."

"A little bit of starch, good bleaching, good ironing: if it weren't for you I *should* look a scamp—eh, Pepita?"

"Your M-majesty, please be kind to me," sobbed the girl. "I only want to be p-proud of my work." She subsided on the grass, covering her bare feet.

"Next week I shall have a new coat of arms," said the king gently. "I shall put a washtub instead of the lion, and in place of the crown a little white shirt. If my conscience could be cleansed by your beautiful hands as well as my clothes, Pepita, I should be the proudest man on earth. But as to the conscience, every man must be his own lavender."

Then he uncovered, kissed the girl's hands, and turning to the boatman, put his hand on his shoulder and said, "Lead on, my good fellow!"

So the two of them swung down the path through the gorge, beyond which the town lay; while Pepita crouched still in the brilliant warm grass, alternately peeping in amazement at her bare feet, and then at her brown hands, which had been kissed by the King whose ears but just now had tingled under them.

