

THE WHITE MARBLE SPHINX.

By ROSAMUND MARRIOTT WATSON.*



It was summer-time in the Little Boy's garden, and they were all busy shelling peas on the broad lower lawn, under the shadow of the big may-tree. The midday sun was shining on the smooth grass and the flower-beds full of red and white roses; and which sounded the sweeter, the soft, rippling whisper of the fountain, or the blue-tit's odd little song as he fitted in and out between the cherry-tree boughs, it would have been difficult to tell. They were all very busy; that is to say, the Little Boy and his Mother were scooping the pearly green peas out of their pods and dropping them with a little, rattling sound into a big, blue-and-white bowl; while Tony, the Little Boy's small, smooth, white dog, and Toutou, his large, black, fluffy cat, and Francis, his friend, and the Sphinx, were busy watching them. They had not been speaking for at least two minutes when the Little Boy said: "I can't make out what other thing it is he says, Mummy. First he says: 'Yes—it—is, yes—it—is, yes—it—is,' just as though someone we can't hear was keeping on contradicting him; but the other bit is longer. There, he's singing it again!"

"It sounds very like something that is true sometimes, just now and then, about you," said his Mother, smiling in rather a funny way; "but that isn't true to-day."

"I know what it is," broke in Francis; "it's 'Naughty Dickie, Naughty Dickie, Naughty Dickie!' and I suppose that's what they mean by 'tell-tale-tit.'"

"However did you guess?" asked the Little Boy. "But he's wrong to-day, anyhow, for I haven't been the least littlest bit bad ever since I woke up this morning; have I, Mummy?"

"No, dear, not the very least; you've been as good, and almost as quiet, as the Sphinx all the morning."

"Oh!" groaned Francis, rolling over on to his back among the daisies, "I only wish I felt half as cool as the Sphinx looks; even here in the shade it's hot—it's hot everywhere." It certainly was hot; so hot that the families of dingy brown sparrows who were busily taking their midday bath all round the rim of the fountain could talk of nothing else. And the white marble Sphinx did look beautifully cool, sitting so calm and still under the may-tree, with its great wings that looked, to the Little Boy, always ready to take flight, as if it might spread them at any moment and sail off into the sky. He would not, he thought, feel in the least surprised if it did. It sat there always with that wise, quiet smile on its beautiful face, looking as if it knew all about everything in the world, and felt rather pleased with it on the whole. "It could tell me all sorts of wonderful things, I am sure, if it liked," he said to himself, as he softly popped the last shining green pod between thumb and finger; but he did not say this out loud, because he never told other children his thoughts about the Sphinx, for fear they should laugh and think him silly.

He carried the big, blue-and-white bowl over the sunny lawn and gave it to Cook through the kitchen window, and Cook said: "Thank you, Master Dickie. What a useful boy you do get! Whatever we should do without your help, I'm sure I don't know!" And when he got back to the may-tree and plumped down on the cool grass again, he found that Francis had moved his place and was sitting in front of the Sphinx.

"Whatever has it got round its neck?" he was asking, "and whatever for? Whoever can have been goose enough to go putting a wreath on a silly stone image?"

The Little Boy turned rather red, but he did not say anything, only as he looked at the marble face he could have declared that it smiled at him. Just for the tiniest part of a second it seemed—no more; or perhaps it might only have been a twinkle of sunlight falling between the thick hawthorn boughs as a blackbird flew clucking out and dashed across his garden into the next.

The Little Boy's Mother looked up and smiled very much the same kind smile as

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the Sphinx. "Dick has always been very fond of it," she said. "When he was quite a tiny baby, we used to wheel him out here in his perambulator and let him sleep beside it

Sphinx is really an old friend, and must not be made fun of!"

And the next minute the two boys had raced off to the fountain to look at the one gold-fish who wouldn't turn golden like the rest, but obstinately remained a dull purple with two white spots, which, of course, was a serious matter; and even Francis could not think what had better be done. "A boy I know," he said sternly, "used to give his the yellow gelatine off crackers when he had any; but I don't remember if it did them any good."

The shadows were long upon the lawn, and the sun was low when the Little Boy came down the garden to the may-tree again.

Francis's Fräulein had taken him home some time since, and the Little Boy felt just comfortably tired with the pleasant, long day of play. He was rather pleased, too, with some new inventions they had hit upon between them, and especially with one—an idea strictly of his own—about making a little summer-house in the orchard-garden for his dormice, with a wee flower-led and a fountain with real water in front, and perhaps a real radish-plot behind it. He would soon have to go in, he knew, for it was getting near bedtime; but the evening air was so soft and cool, and the thrush was singing such a sweet "Good night" from the very topmost bough of the towering green pagoda of the cedar, that he felt happy all through and just as good as gold. The roses in the garland that hung about the Sphinx's neck were drooping now, and the great, white wings behind the



"Was it you that spoke?"

in the shade; and later on, when he used to crawl about on rugs and cushions, he seemed to like being here best. Yes, and the very first time he ever stood upright of his own accord, he pulled himself up by its left wing and said something most triumphantly in his own language. So you see, Francis, the

beautiful head glimmered strangely in the dim, blue twilight, almost as though they were moving, he thought. It was altogether too peaceful and pleasant to go in, even to the comfortable night-nursery and the smooth, white bed. "Mummy and Daddy are going out to dinner to-night," he remembered; "and I expect Emma is helping her to dress, and will come to call me in when she wants me." So he loitered to and fro and sang to himself as he went. He sang out of sheer contentment, without much thought of either the words or the tune, in much the same way as the thrush sings just before going to sleep. The words were out of a little song his Mother had made for him a few days ago, and went something like this—

O, when I was a little child, I had
a golden tree,
With golden boughs and blossoms
overhead;
And there were golden chimneys
to my house that used to be,
And a sound of golden wings
about my bed.

And the tune was a very pretty one.

"What is that you are singing?" said a low, clear voice just behind him. "It sounds sweetly . . . it reminds me—"

The Little Boy took both his hands out of his pockets and stared round him in bewilderment. It certainly was not Emma's voice; and, besides, Emma was nowhere to be seen. There was a yellow light in Mummy's bedroom window, and every now and then a dark figure would flit across the orange-coloured square of it; but there was no one at all on the lawn but himself and—yes—there was the Sphinx. The sun was quite gone now, and the early stars were coming out one by one.

"Was it you that spoke?" said the Little Boy; and now he felt sure, for the Sphinx smiled at him through the soft starlight—there could be no possible mistake about it

this time—and slightly bent its head towards him. "But why have you never spoken to me before?" he asked.

"Why have you never stayed out here after sunset before on this day of the year?" replied the same quiet voice.

"I don't know," he said, still a little bewildered. "I suppose Mummy didn't allow me to. And what do you mean by this day



"Oh, Master Dickie! what a turn you have given me!"

of the year? and how did you come alive? I've often and often wanted to tell you things, but I was afraid it wouldn't be any use—"

"Well, you can tell me anything you like now," said the Sphinx. "And how comes it

that you do not know what day this is? Can you truly be so ignorant as not to know that this is what some people call Old Midsummer Eve, and others St. John's Eve? It had another name in days gone by, but that you would not understand. Why, it is the most important time in all the year—the one evening when I and many others of my kind are able to speak and move and live, and are free to go where we will. If you were to go into the drawing-room now, you would not find the white stone lady (as I have heard you call her) on her pedestal in the corner by the window; and—look over at the fountain—where is the cherub with the fish's tail (as you call him)? Can you see him?"

The Little Boy rubbed his eyes and peered through the gathering dusk. "N-no," he said after a pause. "I can't exactly make him out; but it's getting rather dark, you know, now. How I wish I didn't have to go to bed! Emma is sure to be here in a minute, and I did so want to stay and talk to you."

"Look out of your window before you jump into bed," said the Sphinx. "The stars will be giving plenty of light by then; and see if you can make *me* out here."

Its smile was more mysteriously sweet than ever as it spoke, and its wide wings rustled softly, as though it were going to spread them.

"Oh, don't fly away!" cried the child, so dolefully that the Sphinx looked almost sorry. "Oh! where are you going? and what for? and will you perhaps never come back again?"

"Hush, hush!" said the winged, white creature—and this time it seemed to smile in quite a kind, comforting sort of way—"they are calling you from the house. Don't you hear them? Go now, or they will be displeased; and perhaps—perhaps—who knows?—you may see me presently." And not a word more would it say.

Sure enough, they were calling him from the house; and as he turned slowly to go in, he could catch the whitish glimmer of Emma's apron far down the gravel walk. He must certainly hurry; she was actually coming to look for him, although he knew how she never could bear the garden at any time, and especially when it was dark.

"I'm coming, Emma," he called. "You need not come to fetch me."

"Oh, Master Dickie!" she said, as they went up the steps into the house, "what a turn you have given me, to be sure! I

thought you were safe in the study with your new picture-book; and when I went to look and found you gone—well, there! I called Cook and Emily; and Cook said there never was no telling what you'd be up to next; and Emily, she said there was some horridlike-looking gipsy women selling bootlaces and tapes and pins come round to the back door about tea-time, and did I think they could have run off with you for your clothes? And I'm all of a tremble still. However you could have stayed out so late in that nasty, dark garden, with all them great, ugly bushes and trees all round you, is more than I can tell; but anything for a bit of mischief, I suppose."

They were upstairs in the nursery by this time, and Emma stopped for want of breath, for she had been talking very fast, as she did sometimes when she got excited.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean to frighten you, Emma. And don't you remember you said I could stay out there a little longer, as it was so warm?"

"Well, well, let's hear no more about it," said Emma quite nicely; "but you can't have your bath to-night now—Cook's let the fire out, and there's no hot water. I'll just wash your face and hands, and brush your hair, and you must tumble into bed double quick. It's goodness knows what o'clock already, you young Turk!"

The Little Boy never could quite remember whether he had just dozed off to sleep for a little while or not. But he thought not; in fact, he was almost sure about it when he came to think of it afterwards, for it seemed to him that no sooner had Emma bidden him "Good night, and be a good boy and go to sleep at once," and taken away the candle, than he began to notice how very brightly the full moon was shining into the room—so brightly, indeed, that he lifted his head from his pillow to look. And while he was looking, and wondering half drowsily at the golden light of it, he saw something that made him feel wide awake in an instant. He was out of bed the next moment, with both casements thrown wide open—for the latch was quite an easy one—looking out eagerly into the moonlit garden. Just outside his window there grew a tall, dark pine-tree, and it was between the thick plumes of this that he had thought to see a flutter of great white wings and to hear the wind of them. And again he was not mistaken; for as he watched and wondered, kneeling on the wide window-seat in his little, white nightgown, the great,

white Sphinx wheeled slowly through the moonlight with wings outspread, and hovered outside above the nursery window-sill with its scented garland of pale, clambering roses. Its face looked radiant with happiness, and the drooping garland round its neck, which the child had made and hung there early that morning, was as fresh and dewy as when he had gathered the flowers.

"You see, I have kept my promise," it said; "and now I must leave you—I have far to go."

"Do tell me where, dear Sphinx!" cried the child wistfully. "I do wish you were not going, but would stay and talk to me instead. You can't *think* how dull it is to be in bed when you don't want to be asleep, and they won't let you get up."

"No," said the Sphinx thoughtfully; "I don't think I can. But are you not sleepy?"

"Not a bit?"

"Well——"

"Oh, what? Mummy nearly always is thinking of some pleasant kind of plan when she says 'Well,' like that!"

"I was only considering," said the Sphinx slowly, as it crouched on the broad sill, fanning its wings gently in the still air—"I was thinking whether you would like to go with me to-night. In a very few years you will be too old for me to take you; and there might not be such another chance for you as this."

"Oh, could you really, really take me with you? Could you, could you?" cried the Little Boy, bouncing up and down on the cushions with excitement.

"Be careful," replied the Sphinx, turning about as it spoke. "Don't leave go of the casement-frame until you are safely settled between my wings, and take a firm hold of the chaplet of roses round my neck. Then you will be quite safe. Now we are going to start——"

And suddenly they were sailing smoothly, but more swiftly than the child had ever been carried before, even in trains, through the warm blue and golden summer night—blue with the deep skies and golden with the broad, round moon. The strong pinions beat the air so fast that they scarcely seemed to move in their steady flight, and the child was so happy and so comfortable that he did not feel in the least afraid, although they were so far above the earth that the cities below as they flew looked no bigger than those little towns and dwelling-places that you build with your flocks. The Sphinx's back was just like white velvet to lean

against; and once when the wing-feathers accidentally brushed his face, the Little Boy was reminded of a soft, fluffy boa his Mother used to sometimes wear. On and on they sailed, and always with the same steadfast swiftness; and sometimes there would seem to be land and mountains and rivers far down beneath them, and sometimes the restless sea.

"Where are we going?" said the Little Boy, speaking for the first time since they had started.

"We are there," the Sphinx answered. "Hold fast!"

And down, down, down they sank, slowly and still more slowly, until they alighted with a soft shock on a great, grassy space that seemed to be upon a hillside, and was thickly grown with the strangest, loveliest flowers the child had ever seen, while some of the trees seemed made—leaves, stems, and all—of the purest silver, and others stood all starred with scented, white blossom, and hung with golden globes of fruit.

The child sat upon the sweetly smelling grass and looked about him in silence. Gradually, as his eyes grew more used to see through the blue night and the golden light of the moon, he could make out the wide sweep of a bay and a quiet sea lapping along the shores of it; and then looking behind him, the oddest city, he thought, that could ever have been. Narrow marble streets, and marble houses with courtyards and sparkling fountains, and white terraces, and glowing pictures painted on the walls. It certainly was the most wonderful place in the world. There did not seem to be any staircases to the houses, and very few roofs; but it was lovely all the same, he said in his heart, as he turned to the Sphinx, and was just going to say so out loud, but—"Hush!" it whispered. "Listen and look, for this is what you can never see again."

And suddenly, to sweet, wild music, blown on pipes and reeds, came flocking a troop of creatures as strange as the place itself. Beautiful ladies all in floating white, and decked with clustering, trailing garlands; little, naked, winged baby boys, some with bows and arrows and quivers, and others with torches; young men with short, curly, golden hair, and leopard-skins about their shoulders, older men with ivy-wreaths about their brows, and hairy, goatlike legs and hoofs—all these, and many more that he could never rightly remember, came dancing as lightly as fairies or fireflies over the flowery sward. Now drifting apart, now



"On and on they sailed."

clustering all together, like snowflakes in the beginning of a long fall, they came and went, mingling and separating till the child could scarcely tell one being from another; but all at once it broke upon him that there was one there that he surely knew—the white,

stone lady from his Mother's drawing-room who stood always in the corner near the window. He glanced at his companion, who nodded and smiled, and then—just as suddenly as it had begun—the strange dance ended and the figures vanished from the slope. The

Sphinx sighed deeply. "We must be gone," it said. "Climb upon my back between my wings and hold fast to the rope of roses." And as the child, half in a dream, unwillingly obeyed, it sighed again more heavily still and rose slowly into the brightening heavens.

"I never could have thought of anything so beautiful. But why are you so sad? Are you very tired? And am I too heavy?" asked the Little Boy after a long silence.

"That is my country," said the Sphinx—"my own home, where I lived always under the blue skies and the sunshine until the old lord saw me and had me carried to his ship and brought over the sea."

"What lord? And how unkind of him!" said the child. "Who was he?"

"They said he was a brave sailor, and fought well for his country; but I know nothing of that. He had a white palace with pillars not far from where your house is now, and he put me in the garden of it under an ilex-tree; but the ilex died one cold winter, and then they planted the may-tree instead. I was sorry when the ilex died. And then, one day, the old lord himself died, and they pulled down his palace and made the old, big garden into many new, small ones."

"But ours isn't small," said the child. "Everyone who comes says to Mummy: 'How fortunate you are to have such a large garden so near London!' And she says: 'Yes, I think we are.'"

"Don't talk any more; I have to hurry," said the Sphinx suddenly. "I had no idea

the time had gone so fast. If the sun were to rise——" And it flew faster than ever, so fast that its little rider had to shut his eyes and hold on without thinking of anything else. But at last—"Swish!" whirred the great wings—and there were the dark pine-trees with their waving fingers, and the Little Boy's nursery window, wide open, just as he had left it.

"We are only just in time," he heard the Sphinx saying in his ear. "Climb in quickly, for I have but one half-second to get back to my pedestal on the lawn."

And after that he must have fallen asleep very quickly indeed, for the next thing he heard was Mummy's voice, and she was saying: "Oh, Dickie, how bad of you to be sleeping on the window-seat, with the casements open! Tell me how it happened, dear?"

The morning sun was shining in his eyes so brightly that it made him blink, and he felt very, very drowsy; but he jumped up briskly and stretched his little body and, after a big yawn or two, managed to tell her all about it. "So you see, Mummy, darling," said he in conclusion, "Francis really was all wrong in what he said about our Sphinx being silly. But perhaps he would only laugh even if I told him. I don't think I shall tell him—would you?"

He was sitting on his Mother's knee, and her arm was round him, and she just gave him the kind of gentle little hug that he liked so much as she answered: "No, dearie, I don't think I should tell Francis. He mightn't understand."