

A Dreamer

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

I

By the side of a river near Dublin a little boy of twelve was crouching. He was punching and rolling a handful of the sticky clay from the banks into the shape of a man's head. Not far from him an artist was sketching, and by the boy's side a small girl sat, her eyes and mouth open in amazed admiration of her comrade's work. The call of a woman's distant voice startled the three. And the boy sprang to his feet, so that the clay he was modelling fell from him and rolled to the artist's side. The man took up the work, and turning it in his hands, found it bore a rough resemblance to himself.

"Why, it is clever," he said. "Where did you learn, boy?" The child, forgetting an angry woman was watching him from the distance, flushed beneath the praise.

"I didn't learn," he said.

"Oh! an infant prodigy." The man smiled. "A village genius and the makings of a great artist." He put his hand in his pocket and drew forth a shilling from the few coins there.

"Your first payment, I expect. Go on and prosper—brother."

The boy took the coin shyly. His heart went out in a dream after the artist's words. He was to be great, then—an artist too. The cry of the distant woman to him tumbled him from his heights. He snatched his forgotten basket and ran down the road towards the village to do the message he had not thought of since he came upon the artist on his way. He ran now, the little girl following more slowly.

The artist again turned the clay in his hands. "Alas!" he said. "Here is genius condemned to oblivion for want of a rich patron, and you must fetch and carry because the harsh voice of poverty calls you, leaving the dear delights and love of this behind."

He laid his brush upon the canvas with an infinite, caressing touch, making it copy the glorious copper of the deep waters, and with his movement the clay head rolled upon the ground. He stepped forward, placing his foot upon it, so it fell to pieces—the boy was forgotten.

But the child ran to the village to make his purchases feeling like a king. His work had been recognised as art for the first time. He skipped and jumped as he went, he was so glad; his heart beat loud with dreams. And everybody knows the song it sung, since everybody's heart has beaten the same over its first success. But the angry woman who had borne the boy turned into her house with a sigh.

"I sent him an hour ago," she said, "to fetch the meat. And he would have been there still, fiddling in the mud, if I had not looked out and seen him. He is no good, and he the eldest of them all." She looked around her flock of chubby, commonplace children, and sighed again that he was so unlike them.

When the boy had finished his shopping and was returning, he met the little girl coming to meet him. He clasped her hand in his free one, and swung it backwards and forwards as he walked. "You will wait for me till I grow up, he said; "and we will marry. I will buy you dresses of red silk, trimmed with gold, and you will have emeralds in your hair, and—and you will be grander than Cinderella when I am a great artist."

"And I will buy you a blue velvet suit with a lace collar and emerald rings on all your fingers."

“Men don’t wear rings,” said the boy; “but we shall have a gold coach, like the Lord Mayor’s, and six white horses, and a house of white marble.”

Here he came to the door of his own humble home.

“Lady,” he said, with a remembrance of a beloved fairy story, bowing and extending his hand, “permit me to help you over this rugged and dangerous path.”

The little lady in the blue cotton frock curtsied low, and with a gracious smile, “Thank you, my lord,” held out her chubby, weather-reddened hand. The young lord in corduroys kissed it, and led her up the path to the door of the house.

“I am your true knight,” he said, “and if in danger or deadly peril, blow three blasts upon this horn.” He held a battered dog-whistle towards her. “When I hear it I will go through fire and water—”

Here a strong arm took the luckless knight by the collar, and dragged him not too gently into the house. His castles fell about his ears.

“What’s keeping you at all, Henry. I’d be quicker going myself than sending you for anything, idling and steepling about all day. As for you, Mollie Doherty,” she said, turning to the child, who still stood at the door, “you better go home and get something to do; and I am sure there’s plenty there for you to be busy at.”

“I am going to be an artist, mother,” the boy said hesitatingly—he felt some doubt of his glory before her angry face—“and marry Mollie.”

“Going to be a fiddlestick!” said his mother. “Look at your brothers and sisters all waiting for their dinner while you are messing about in the mud. Go and get something to do.”

The boy, robbed of his dreams, fell to work—such work as was unfortunately fated to be his:

without time, without constancy, without method, to-day to run messages, to-morrow to drive crows from the corn, another day to hang about the office where his father was employed, hoping to get a job; all the waiting, the idle hours, the uninteresting toil, calculated to work ruin upon his already dreamy and procrastinating nature.

That night his mother, folding her sewing with a sigh, spoke to her husband about her eldest son.

“I can’t think who that boy takes after,” she said, “with his nonsense about being an artist. I would sooner see him an honest workman in the position that Providence has given him than one of those fellows, with their indecent models and mud rubbish. I can’t bear to hear him speak of such things. What is good enough for his father is good enough for him, I hope.”

The man did not reply, but got up from his chair by the fire and went out into the night. There he came upon the boy, sitting on the grass, his face upturned to the stars. The child sprang to his feet as his father came towards him. He knew there was no mercy here for his dreams. His father was harsher upon them than his mother. He felt without a friend. The man did not reproach him, but took his hand with a hard grasp.

“Come here,” he said; “I want to speak to you.”

He drew the boy to him out into the moonlight. They seated themselves upon a low wall.

The man took from his pocket a worn pocket-book.

“There is no use forbidding you to dream or follow your inclination to art,” he said, “but I will show you before you are too old to change what it leads to. Your mother wonders where you get your love of art from. Look here and here.”

He drew from the book some old yellow pappers, and smoothed them upon his knee caressingly.

"I was for a few years an art student, and you see I won my passes in all subjects I entered for. You are surprised, you never knew and nobody at home suspects I ever learnt to draw. Well, as a lad I studied in the evenings after my work. I had a clerkship which brought me in enough to pay for my art classes. The masters were good to me, and said I should be a great artist if I stuck to my work and studied hard. I did till I was twenty-two; then I had to travel for my firm, and when I was away met a girl—a pretty, attractive girl. Then it was all romance, love, dreams; and I married her on my little income. She had no money. I married her, and hoped after we had our little cottage furnished to again return to my art. In a year we paid for enough furniture to make it comfortable, but then there was a baby to be considered, and I said, 'Well, in a year or so I shall go back to my dreams; now I must work for my wife and child.' But the years passed, and children came about me, one, two, three, four, every year fresh expenses, less hope, till I am no more a man, only a machine for money-making—keeping the wolf away."

"And the pretty lady," said the child, whose memory had lingered upon the romantic part of his father's story, "where is she?"

"Your mother." The man smiled unwillingly. "A true woman, a good woman, but without imagination or sympathy. She never knew I loved art, I dared not tell her. She would have despised me. She would have thought me selfish if I had turned even for a moment to it. She is not selfish; she has devoted her life to her home and her children, washed, sewn, stinted, toiled for us all; until she has grown hard and old. Alas! my pretty sweetheart, poverty has broken us. As for me, I do not care to live. Live! I do not live—only when I sleep and dream. Then I have conquered, then I am strong. I tell you all, my son, that you may give up this dreaming; you must renounce your dreams, or they will become an agony to you. Take your place beside me, become commonplace, business-like, get on your office stool, marry a woman of your class, and have no other aim than to fill the mouths of her children, and rear them up to people the world. That is your lot."

"But I am going to marry Mollie," the boy said, whispering; for he did not understand.

"Marry no one," said the man, rising, "if you are a dreamer of dreams; but shut yourself away with them, and they will be sweeter than fame. The world cannot hurt you if you keep your dreams. But marry, and poverty will have her foot upon your neck and crush you."

"But I am going to be a great artist," the boy said, with the trill of tears in his voice; "and I will have lots of money." He held up to his father as he spoke the model of a child's head, in clay.

"Give it up!" the man said passionately. "I am jealous of you—I envy you—with your youth and hope and dreams—dreams!" He snatched the clay from the boy's hand, flung it upon the grass, and trampled upon it. "You must not show me these things; you must not touch the clay in my sight: I cannot bear it. Look here!" He lifted the soil and with a few turns of his hands, infinitely caressing, held up a rough study of the head and bust of a woman. "Do you think I do not know? Put it away! put it away!" He flung the work into the darkness and strode back to his house.

"The child," he said to his wife, "is a dreamer of dreams. Hope is his, youth is his, love is his—at least, for a few years—and he is happy, happy."

The wife looked up and laid her knitting in her lap.

"I never understand you in your wild moods, Harry," she said. "I am sure you ought to be happy, if you are not. You have a quiet home and good children, and I do my best; what more do you want to make you content? Even if we are poor, money is not everything."

"Yes, it is," the man said; "it is everything."

“Harry, I am ashamed of you; and before the children. We have always had enough to eat and to clothe ourselves. You ought to thank God instead of grumbling; there are so many worse off than we are. Soon the children will be earning for us. Of course, I don’t say it is not a fall for us both, living since we were married in a position neither of us were—at least, I was not—used to. But we can still be grateful, even in a small house like this. And I wish you would not sit down to the table with your hand all clay. What were you doing to get them so soiled?—such a bad example for the children.”

II

Few years after this Henry’s father died, and on the shoulders of the eldest son fell his mantle of hopelessness. For a year he, lagging, followed his father’s steps in the deadly monotony of office work. And then the mother was told to take him home—that he was a dreamer and would not work.

The woman sat before him that night and wept more bitter tears than she had at her husband’s death.

“I wonder,” she sobbed, “if children ever realize how much their mothers sacrifice for their sakes? Can you not think of the long years I have worked for my children? I was young when you came to me, Henry,—only a girl,—but I had to give up pleasure and amusement, and sew for you, and stint for you, and work so hard. I had to rise early and sleep late; I had to wash, and scrub, and iron, till my hands grew red and my hair white. Oh! I loved pleasure as much as you do, and could have idled my time when I was young; but for your sake I did not. And for me, now that I have reared you, you will do nothing to assist. Your poor father was no help in rearing my children; he had no sympathy with them, and thrust it all on me. He was always engrossed in his business, as was right; but he might have seen how the burden of poverty and children had aged and wearied me. My youth has gone unsatisfied, and I am old—old, and tired of it all.”

The boy, full of affection, wound his arms about her.

“I shall work for you, mother. Indeed, indeed, I never mean to neglect my work; and I will strive so hard, and in a few years I shall have you dressed in silk, and none shall be as beautiful as my mother.”

The woman dried her tears and kissed him on the forehead. “You are a dear fool,” she said; “I cannot help loving you.”

When the lad rose in the morning he left his dreams upon his pillow. By the post there came a letter offering him, for his father’s sake, a small clerkship. He bent the note and threw it so it flew like a bird into his mother’s lap.

“Good fortune flies to you,” he said; “did I not tell you I should succeed?” He looked round the table at the rosy, fat faces of his brothers and sisters. “Ladies and gentlemen, please order your bonnets and cigars, and money is no object.”

As he went out towards the city he stood by the river where he had played as a child years ago. For there, to his amazement, he saw the same artist he remembered seeing then, working on the still unfinished picture. He could not help going up and speaking.

“Why, boy,” the man said; “you here still? I often thought of you, and wondered what you had done with your life.”

“Why, nothing—nothing yet,” the lad answered.

“Yet! yet! Is it the spirit of the everlasting hills or Time himself who speaks to me? What frail possessor of uncertain years can afford to say, ‘Nothing yet’? It is the ‘nothing yet’ that kills

success. The other day, after all these years, I came upon this unfinished canvas in my studio; I remembered how poor, how miserable I had been when I began it, and I said I will finish it now I am happy—for I have succeeded, boy, in the years you have done ‘nothing yet.’ Still, to help you, for I know you have talent, I make this proposal I shall take you for a year, pay your expenses, and see if you really are the genius I think you. If you are, I shall educate you as an artist; if not, why, you will be no worse off here than you have been before.”

The boy, stunned and dazzled at the prospect of so much happiness, could answer nothing. The artist handed him a card and bid him go.

“You can think it over,” he said. “Let me know; there is my address. No thanks—be off. Remember Rome, Italy, and art. I leave to-morrow.”

To Rome! to Rome! The lad went along the river bank and sank upon a rock; hiding his face in his hands, he let loose his dreams. What a prospect! What joy! He felt two soft hands upon his shoulders, and, reaching up, he caught them.

“O Mollie! Mollie! Mollie!” he sang, drawing her down beside him, “did you see a golden bird flying towards me as you came?”

“Foolish boy!” the girl smiled. “What was the bird’s name?”

“Good luck! Good fortune!” he answered, laughing loud; “and it flew my way.”

“What is it, dear?” The girl bent to him. “Tell me the story.”

And so he told her. She saddened at the thought of a parting, glad for his delight, listened and followed him through his world of dreams—always a watcher, willing to live in the shine of his successes. He held her hands and traced out their happy lives together. And she leant towards him, already dwelling in those splendid years he told her of.

A child’s rough hand upon his shoulder startled both.

“Mother wants to know what you are doing, sitting here,” came the shrill voice, full of reproach.

The lad started to his feet. “What am I doing—oh! I must tell mother. Sit there, Mollie, till I come back and tell you what she says.”

He took the child’s hand, telling him that a fairy god-mother had come for him to take him away to a beautiful city and make him a king. But the child listened with a sulky face, and coming near the house, loosed his brother’s hand and ran crying indoors. When Henry followed he found himself the centre of a depressing group. His brothers’ and sisters’ reproachful faces stared silently from their various positions about the room. His mother was seated, her hands, idle for the moment, clasped hard together, her eyes shining with the gathering of a rain-storm.

“I have had such luck, mother,” he began, then stopped; the universal sulky gloom on all faces repressed him.

The child who had preceded him cried out, “He is going away to be a rich man, and won’t work for us any more.”

The mother put him aside.

“You must be lucky, indeed,” she said bitterly, “if you can afford to sit idle by the river and throw away your chance of the office work you have been offered.”

The lad flushed, but told his story. The hope faded from his face as he saw hers did not brighten in the hearing, but instead disappointment settled upon it.

“And what of us when you, the eldest, go to make your fortune?—what will become of us? I am getting too old, and cannot work much longer. John won’t be old enough to take your place for a couple of years, and the girls will have to give up school and go out as—as servants; and all because you are training for what you never have talent to be. When you playing in your

beautiful home, with plenty to eat and drink, think of your old mother and your little sisters and brothers, who are, perhaps, turned out from the only roof that can cover them. She bowed her head and burst into tears. Henry saw the grey of her hair and the roughness of her hands; every eye from the stern young faces around the room denounced him. He stood like a thief in the dock. What! rob them of a hundred a year, take the food from their mouths, and the clothes from their backs! And that poor mother, how her sobs killed him! He put his hand upon her shoulder. "Don't cry," he said; "of course, I never meant to go."

He left the house hastily and strode with quick steps along the river bank. He passed by Mollie as she sat waiting for him, but did not speak. He bent his head upon his breast, and she saw how it was, and wept for him when he had gone.

"Yet he would have forgotten me," she said; and then, "Oh, how selfish I am! Poor fellow! how he will suffer!"

But Henry did not suffer as keenly as she imagined; his was a nature to dream, and not to do. He suffered less, after the first disappointment, by being deprived of the action than if he had been denied the right to dream of being famous. He felt he had made little sacrifice when he wrote to the artist saying he could not take his offer, but accepted his fate with scarcely a murmur.

"We are like the leaves upon the river of he would say—"we go with the waters."

III

For twelve years Henry plodded on slowly in his office. Not being clever, he stayed but by his employer's indulgence, and at home he was seldom recognised as one of themselves by his brothers and sisters. The noisy, commonplace boys and girls let the dreamer pass amongst them unnoticed. He kept the roof above them, but they gave him no credit for that. He might have done so much more. He dwelt in the midst of them, and never realized how bored he was by the commonplace. Two of the girls married men with moderate means, and then the mother died. The second son got a clerkship in a bank. And one day the youngest came to Henry, and spoke to him in a manner so unusually kind that Henry guessed he must have done him some injury. And then it came out that he was to get the position at the office where Henry had been so long.

"You see, you are so slow," he said; "and now that I am grown they think it would be all the same if I took your place."

"And what is to become of me?" Henry asked.

"You? Oh, we were thinking—the rest and myself"—the young fellow hesitated—"now that the girls are married and the boys all doing for themselves, that—that you might go and study your art. You always wanted to, you know; and the house is so small for us boys, now that we have grown up."

Henry looked about him. The first thought was of loss and desolation—he was of no use in the world.

"I might go to America," he said, thinking.

"A grand idea!" His brother was charmed. "It's quite easy to make a fortune there. You'd better go at once. You will be richer than us all, old fellow." He patted him on the shoulder. He was delighted; he never felt so kindly to his brother before. They would all love him so much if he would take the gloom of his presence across the water. The girls were so smart now, and Henry was such a shabby, slouching fellow, never caring what he wore; they were all ashamed to be seen with him. He would get on ever so much better in America.

Henry walked out of the house, going like a man who had lost his way. He did not know where to turn; first he walked instinctively in the direction of his office, then came back to the river-side and threw himself upon the bank. He took a lump of wax from his pocket and commenced moulding it unconsciously. While he worked at it his depression fell from him. He realized with a shock that he was free, quite free: no more little hands to keep pulling him back. He had accepted them as fate then. His brothers and sisters, so unlike himself—no, he did not love them. Only he would have died for them if it had been demanded of him. His sense of duty was strong. Here by the river he was conscious of missing some presence other than his brothers and sisters. It came to him before he realized who it was he missed.

She was a woman now, sweet and slender—his sweetheart all through the years.

“Mollie,” he said, “I am going away at last; I am going away to make my fortune and come back to marry you.”

She looked up with a white face.

“Where are you going, dear?” she asked. She had got used to waiting; it was not much when she could see him every day and feel his affections surround her.

“Willie has taken my place at the office, and nobody wants me at home. I am going to America, to work—with my hands. Mollie dear, I am going to be a man, and give up my dreams—at least, till I have earned enough to keep you and them. You will not mind waiting a little longer, dearest?”

The woman raised his hands in hers and laid her cheek upon them. She remembered what he did not realize—that the years were passing so quickly.

“We could not have married,” the man continued, “if I had remained here. It was for the best my brother succeeded. While they wanted me and the money I could not have been free; and on whatever income I make now we shall have only our two selves to keep. Do you remember the artist we met here who offered me such a glorious future? Ah! wish he were here now.”

“He is!”

The two started up at the voice and looked round. A little old man, shabby, and bent, stood behind them, with a portfolio under his arm.

He looked at the wax head the younger man had been modelling.

“Very little better than the head you showed me as a child. What have you been doing all these years?”

“Nothing, sir!”

“Nothing! nothing! nothing! Do the years not move for you, young sir. Fortunes are made and lost, thrones are gained and lost, empires have fallen, and all while you do nothing.”

The young man hung his head.

“Look at me,” the artist continued. “I painted a picture here that won me a fortune, I became rich, I became famous. I had my day, I lived, I lost my fortune, and was forgotten, and I am here again selling from cottage to cottage the prints of my picture.”

“I am sorry,” the young man answered.

“You need not be.” The artist laughed. “For what is fame? The clatter of tongues, the buzzing of flies. Bah! give me money to buy a brush and colours, and, sitting with solitude, I paint—I am happy.”

The quaint old man passed on with a nod of farewell.

IV

Henry was seated by the table in his little hut in California. Before him lay a pile of letters, some of them faded, others stained with—perhaps tears, some with the outline of an enclosed flower or leaf. He moved his hand and let it idly turn them, he read a bit of one here and there.

“It is good to feel you love my letters,” he read—“that they are a strength to you. I think of you always and pray for your success. Oh! may it be soon, so that I see you again. How long the years are!”

And again:—

“Henry, things are happening with all the world except us. Your brothers are all married, and Willie has made a name for himself in the city. Indeed, we do not see much of one another, your family and myself; I seldom even speak to your people. Alas! you do not realize how old and dowdy I am, or perhaps you would be ashamed to love me too. I almost dread, when I think of my changed face, the hour you return and we meet after the long years, when you will at last realize I am old.”

But the one his eyes dwelt upon longest was:—

“Can you not come home to me. My heart hungers for you. The years are long for separation dearest; they are too long. Let us be poor together. What does it matter? Nothing matters but the passing of time, and you away from me. Let us be together. I see death cutting down people all around me, and I am afraid. Life is passing, passing. All the years of you that should be mine are passing. Come to me.”

How dear these letters had been to him all the years—he had forgotten how long. They never missed a post, and he had grown so used to these silent white messengers flying into his solitude, and breaking it with sweet conversation that he felt at times almost loth to put an end to their coming by going home. He had grown content with his surroundings; like a thistle seed that had been blown hither and thither through the air is at last forced into the ground and rooted. He had drifted about and settled at length in this little hut in California. Here, undisturbed, he had dreamt his dreams and modelled and remodelled his wax, always making shapes of some intended masterpiece, and breaking it up as soon as finished in despair, only to start as hopefully in a day or so again. So his evenings passed, and with the long letters from Mollie he felt he had still the sweet companionship he had never known what it was to have been without. The daytime of the years he spent in fruit-gathering for any one who would have his work. Thus he managed to save a little money, and, with luck unusual to him, saved enough to buy a tiny farm for himself; and on it was the little log hut he now sat in. He had almost made up his mind to sell out again and start for home,—the last letter of Mollie’s filled him with a vague fear,—but another letter had come by the same post from his sister, asking him to take charge of a ne’er-do-well son.

“The boy,” she wrote, “wants the calm open-air life you can so easily give him; his heart is the heart of a poet, and cannot bear to be tied up with the conventuality of town life. His father is too harsh with him, forgetting he was himself once young. Be kind to my poor boy; he is not very strong.”

When the young man arrived, Henry found him a worthless boor—idle and a drunkard. The lout fastened upon him like a parasite, and the little farm had to support two. Henry relinquished his immediate dreams of returning home or sending for Mollie, and took upon himself the task of earning for this young nephew, as he had done for his brothers and sisters.

At first he thought it possible to make a man of him, for the boy was full of insincere sentimental effects, hard to see through; now lamenting his mother’s absence with tears, and

writing her long letters of affection, which he read to his uncle with evident pride in their composition; now promising his uncle he would never touch drink again, so fervently that it was impossible to believe that he meant nothing.

For a year Henry wavered between the impulse to cast this worthless boor from him and the pity of deserting so weak a creature entirely to the power of his own passions. But at last the youth cut the bond himself by tiring of the monotony of the farm life and leaving his uncle one night, taking what money he could find along with him.

A month after Henry got a letter from his sister denouncing him for his treatment of her boy.

“He has told me how you made his life a misery, reproaching him for his delicacy. And having the pride *some* of his family are without, he could no longer bear it. Without money, hungry, and in rags, he left you and came back to his mother.”

By the same post he received a letter from Mollie.

“O Henry! the years will be so very short when we meet—so very few; come, come, come!”

After that there was a silence—a long silence of months. Henry grew restless; every evening he sat at his table reading over the old letters, wondering why Mollie never wrote. Had she grown tired of him? had some one else come between them? His heart burned at the thought. He strode up and down the room. She was so pretty, so pretty! He looked at the little picture face he always carried in the locket she had given him; and then for the first time he wondered if he had himself changed. He looked over the walls for a glass, but remembered he had never possessed one, or seen himself for years. He went into another room, and there found a glass left by his nephew. He went up to it, then fell back as if he had been struck. What! was this, then, Henry?—the great artist, the fond lover—a poor white old man—an old man! He thought of all his dreams for the future. “My God! there is no future,” he said. He sat down and laughed his foolish young heart away. Then flung himself upon his bed and slept like a man who was broken with much sorrow. He woke with the gloom of a great cloud overhanging him, and lay long before he arose; he felt too weary to move. “And every morning,” he said, “when I felt so tired, I thought it laziness that held me down, and it was age—old man—age.” In the evening he went out to cut wood for firing, but he laid his chopper beside the uncut logs after a few blows. “I could fight against the languor of youth,” he said, “but against age I cannot fight. I will go back to Mollie; she will comfort me.”

He sold his little holding, and set about returning. The movement let his dreams loose again, and he forgot he was old; he walked the deck of the steamer that brought him back, and all the time he dreamt of Mollie. She would be changed, too, his Mollie—faded, perhaps, with time, like the little picture he carried, but with a sweet white resemblance to the old love. All the great dreams were over for them both, but she would be content with little where she had dreamt of much. They would be just as happy, even if they were poor. Perhaps, who knows, he thought, with her beside him to spur him on, he might begin to work in earnest at last.

When he reached the bridge that led into the village where he was born, he stood upon it, looking across the water. Impossible, he thought, that he was old—that any one was changed. Why, what was different? There the old trees, no older than when he last saw them; there the houses and their little gardens—not a new one added, not an old one taken away. A little boy passed, looking up at him; he called him towards him.

“Tell me,” he said, trembling, “where is Mollie Doherty now?”

“I don’t know any one of that name,” answered the child.

“You *must* know!” Henry cried in anger. “She lived in the little house yonder, by the elm tree.”

“Oh! old Mother Mollie,” the boy laughed; “her we called four-legged Molly, for she went lubbely, lubbely on crutches, and her face all one side, like this.”

Henry struck the grinning face of the boy sharply with his hand; and the child, angry and revengeful, sprang back and commenced grinning afresh. He perceived where the wound lay, and flicked it. He hobbled slowly around the old man, grinning and shouting a tune to his steps—the same tune he had shouted after Mollie as she limped past. But as he saw the old man no longer heeded him, he cried,—

“She is dead, old four-legged Mollie is dead. She died three months ago, Father Christmas.”

But the old man on the bridge did not answer; he stood while the last gleams of youth faded from him, and he was old indeed, as the sun sets behind a hill, driving the warm purple shadows away, leaving it cold and bleak. He went at last to his brother’s house, and there a kind young niece met him.

“You would like to see poor Mollie’s grave,” she said, as she brought him through the fields into the churchyard. “That is it. When I have a lover,” she continued, as he sat with his head upon his hands, “I will not wait for him as she did for you, poor thing! Why did you not come to her?”

The old man beside the grave thought, but could not remember. After all, why had he not returned? Now the difficulties which had parted them did not seem difficulties at all. He bent over the grave, and the young girl in her pity went wandering away. But Henry was not grieving, as she imagined; he was wondering why he did not suffer more. After all, he felt almost glad the agony of parting was over. “We could have had only a few years together, I am so old,” he thought. “And life or death can do no more for us; the agony of parting is past, we shall only meet for ever now.” He fell to dreaming of their meeting, and what she would say—how they would look at each other and go hand in hand amongst the strangers in the new world of everlasting time, she pointing out the wonders he had not seen.

His niece came upon him and reproached his dry eyes.

“You did not weep for her,” she said.

“Tell me about her; how did she look?” he answered, holding her hand.

The girl turned her eyes aside.

“Her face was—her face—when she died she looked beautiful; all the—the—deformity went, and her face fell back into its young lines. It was like death triumphing over life, if you can understand.”

The old man dropped her hand, and took from his pocket a lump of wax. “It will be my masterpiece,” he said—“death triumphing over life.” He commenced modelling.

The girl sprang to her feet.

“You do not care at all for her,” she said. “I hate you, Uncle Henry; you did not cry a tear.”

The old man’s feeble fingers trembled so that he could not form the wax. The work slipped from them and, falling upon the ground, rolled into a crevice beneath the stone of Mollie’s grave.

“I am too old,” he said—“too old.”