Walter Besant, “The Shrinking Shoe” (1895)

I

‘Oh you poor dear!’ said the two Elder Sisters in duet, ‘you’ve got to stay at home while we go to the ball. Good night, then. We *are* so sorry for you! We did hope that you were going too!’

‘Good night, Elder Sisters,’ said the youngest, with a tear just showing in either eye, but not rolling down her cheek. ‘Go and be happy. If you *should* see the Prince you may tell him that I am waiting for the Fairy and the Pumpkin and the Mice.’

The Elder Sisters fastened the last button—the sixth, was it? or the tenth perhaps—took one last critical, and reassuring, look at the glass, and departed.

When the door shut the Youngest Sister sat down by the fire; and one, two, three tears rolled down her cheeks.

Mind you, she had very good cause to cry. Many girls cry for much less. She was seventeen: she had understood that she would come out at this visit to London. Coming out, to this country girl, meant just this one dance and nothing more. But no—her sisters were invited and she was not. She was left alone in the house. And she sat down by the fire and allowed herself to be filled with gloom and sadness, and with such thoughts as, in certain antiquated histories, used to be called rebellious. In short, she was in a very bad temper indeed. Never before had she been in such a bad temper. As a general rule she was sweet-tempered as the day is long. But—which is a terrible thing to remember—there are always the possibilities of bad temper in every one: even in Katharine—Katie—Kitty, who generally looked as if she could never, never, never show by any outward sign that she was

vexed, or cross, or put out, or rebellious. And now, alas! she was in a bad temper. No hope, no sunshine, no future prospects; her life was blasted—her young spring life. Disaster irretrievable had fallen upon her. She could not go to the ball. What made things worse was, that the more angry she grew the louder she heard the dance music, though the band was distant more than a mile. Quite plainly she heard the musicians. They were playing a valse which she knew—a delicious, delirious, dreamy, swinging valse. She saw her sisters among a crowd of the most lovely girls in the world, whirling in the cadence that she loved upon a floor as smooth as ice, with cavaliers gallant and gay. The room was filled with maidens beautifully dressed, like her sisters, and with young men come to meet and greet them on their way. Oh, happy young men! Oh, happy girls! Katie had been brought up with such simplicity that she envied no other girl, whether for her riches or for her dresses; and was always ready to acknowledge the loveliness and the sweetness and the grace of any number of girls—even of her own age. As regards her own sex, indeed, this child of seventeen had but one fault; she considered twenty as already a serious age, and wondered how anybody could possibly laugh after five-and-twenty. And, as many, or most, girls believe, she thought that beauty was entirely a matter of dress; and that, except on state occasions, no one should think of beauty—i.e., of fine dress.

She sat there for half an hour. She began to think that it would be best to go to bed and sleep off her chagrin, when a Rat-tat-tat at the door roused her. Who was that? Could it—could it—could it be the Fairy with the Pumpkin and the Mice?

'My dear Katie'—it was not the Fairy, but it was the Godmother— 'how sorry I am! Quick—lay out the things, Ladbrooke.' Ladbrooke was a maid, and she bore a parcel. 'It's not my fault. The stupid people only brought the things just now~ It was my little surprise, dear. We will dress her here, Ladbrooke. I was going to bring the things in good time, to

surprise you at the last moment. Never mind: you will only be a little late. I hope and trust the things will fit. I got one of your frocks, and Ladbrooke here can, if necessary—There, Katie! What do you think of that for your first ball dress?'

Katie was so astonished that she could say nothing, not even to thank her godmother. Her heart beat and her hands trembled; the maid dressed her and did her hair; her godmother gave her a necklace of pearls and a little bunch of flowers: she put on the most charming pair of white satin shoes: she found in the parcel a pair of white gloves with ever so many buttons, and a white fan with painted flowers. When she looked at the glass she could not understand it at all; for she was transformed. But never was any girl dressed so quickly.

'Oh!' she cried. 'You *are* a Fairy. And you've got a Pumpkin as well?'

'The Pumpkin is at the door with the Mice. Come, dear. I shall be proud of my *debutante.'*

The odd thing was that all the time she was dressing, and all the time she sat in the carriage, Katie heard that valse tune ringing in her ears, and when they entered the ball-room that very same identical valse was being played, and the smooth floor was covered with dancers, gallant young men and lovely maidens—all as she had seen and heard in her vision. Oh! there is something in the world more than coincidence. There must be; else, why did Katie. . . .

'Oh, my dear,' said the Elder Sisters, stopping in their dance, 'you have come at last! We knew you were coming, but we couldn't tell. Shall we tell the Prince you are here?'

Then a young gentleman was presented to her. But Katie was too nervous to look up when he bowed and begged. After a little, Katie found that his step went very well with hers. She was then able to consider things a little. Her first partner in her first ball was

quite a young man—she had not caught his name, Mr Geoffrey something— a handsome young man, she thought, but rather shy. He began to talk about the usual things.

'I live in the country,' she said, to explain her ignorance. 'And this is my first ball. So, you see, I do not know any people or anything.'

He danced with her again: she was a wonderfully light dancer; she was strangely graceful; he found her, also, sweet to look at; she had soft eyes and a curiously soft voice, which was as if all the sympathy in all the world had been collected together and deposited in that little brain. He had the good fortune to take her in to supper; and, being a young man at that time singularly open to the charms of maidens, he lavished upon her all the attentions possible. Presently he was so far subdued by her winning manner that he committed the foolishness of Samson with his charmer. He told his secret. Just because she showed a little interest in him, and regarded him with eyes of wonder, he told her the great secret of his life—his ambition, the dream of his youth, his purpose. Next morning he felt he had been a fool. The girl would tell other girls, and they would all laugh together. He felt hot and ashamed for a moment. Then he thought of her eyes, and how they lightened when he whispered; and of her voice, and how it sank when she murmured sympathy and hope and faith. No—with such a girl his secret was safe.

So it was. But for her, if you think of it, was promotion indeed! For a girl who a few days before had been at school, under rules and laws, hardly daring to speak—certainly not daring to have an opinion of her own—now receiving deferential homage from a young man at least four years her senior, and actually being entrusted with his secret ambitions! More; there were other young men waiting about, asking for a dance; all treating her as if—well, modern manners do not treat young ladies with the old reverential courtesy—as if she were a person of considerable importance. But she liked the first young man the best. He had

such an honest face, this young man. It was a charming supper, and, with her charming companion, Katie talked quite freely and at her ease. How nice to begin with a partner with whom one could be quite at one's ease! But everything at this ball was delightful.

After the young man had told his secret, blushing profoundly, Katie told hers—how she had as nearly as possible missed her first ball; and how her sisters had gone without her and left her in the cinders, crying.

'Fairy Godmother turned up at the last moment, and when I was dressed and we went out,' she laughed merrily, 'we found the Pumpkin and the Mice turned into a lovely carriage and pair.'

'It is a new version of the old story,' said the young man.

'Yes,' she replied thoughtfully, 'and now all I want is to find the Prince.'

The young man raised his eyes quickly. They said, with great humility, 'If I could only be the Prince!' She read those words, and she blushed and became confused, and they talked no more that night.

'It was all lovely,' she said in the carriage going home. 'All but one thing—one thing that I said—oh, such a stupid thing!'

'What was it you said, Katie?'

'No: I could never tell anybody. It was *too* stupid. Oh! To think of it makes me turn red. It almost spoiled the evening. And he saw it too.'

'What was it, Katie?'

But she would not tell the Elder Sisters.

'Who was it,' asked one of them, 'that took Katie in to supper?'

'A young man named Armiger, I believe. Horace told me,' said the other Elder. Horace was a cousin. 'Horace says he is a cousin of a Sir Roland Armiger, about whom I

know nothing. Horace says he is a good fellow—very young yet—an undergraduate somewhat. He is a nice-looking boy.'

Then the Elder Sisters began to talk about matters really serious—namely, themselves and their own engagements—and Katie was forgotten.

Two days after the ball there arrived a parcel addressed to the three sisters collectively—'The Misses De Lisle'. The three sisters opened it together, with Evelike curiosity.

It contained a white satin shoe; a silver buckle set with pearls adorned it, and a row of pearls ran round the open part. A most dainty shoe; a most attractive shoe; a most bewildering shoe.

'This,' said the Elder Sisters, solemnly, 'must be tried on by all of us in succession.'

The Elder Sisters began: it was too small for either, though they squeezed and made faces and an effort and a fuss, and everything that could be made except making the foot go into the shoe. Then Katie tried it on. Wonderful to relate, the foot slipped in quite easily. Yet they say that there is nothing but coincidence in the world.

Katie blushed and laughed and blushed again. Then she folded up the shoe in its silver paper and carried it away; and nobody ever heard her mention that shoe again. But everybody knew that she kept it, and the Elder Sisters marvelled because the young prince did not come to see that shoe tried on. He did not appear. Why not? Well—because he was too shy to call.

There are six thousand five hundred and sixty-three variants of this story, as has been discovered through the invaluable researches of the Folk-Lore Society, and it would be strange if they all ended in the same way.

II

The young man told his secret; he revealed what he had never before whispered to any living person; he told his ambition—the most sacred thing that a young man possesses or can reveal.

There are many kinds of ambition; many of them are laudable; we are mostly ambitious of those things which seem to the lowest imagination to be within our reach—such, for instance, as the saving of money. Those who aspire to things which seem out of reach suffer the pain and the penalty of the common snub. This young man aspired to things which seemed to other people quite beyond his reach; for he had no money, and his otherwise highly respectable family had no political influence, and such a thing had never before been heard of among his people that one of themselves should aspire to greater greatness than the succession to the family title with the family property. As a part of the new Revolution, which is already upon us, there will be few things indeed which an ambitious young man will consider beyond his reach. At the present moment, if I were to declare my ambition to become, when I grow up, Her Britannic Majesty's Ambassador at Paris, the thing would be actually received with derision. My young life would be blasted with contempt. Wait, however, for fifty years: you shall then see to what heights I will reach out my climbing hands.

Geoffrey Armiger would have soared. He saw before him the cases of Canning, of Burke, of Disraeli, of Robert Lowe, and of many others who started without any political influence and with no money, and he said to himself, 'I, too, will become a Statesman.'

That was the secret which he confided into Katie's ear; it was in answer to a question of hers, put quite as he could have wished, as to his future career. 'I have told no one,' he

replied in a low voice, and with conscious flush. 'I have never ventured to tell any one, because my people would not understand; they are not easily moved out of the ordinary groove. There is a family living, and I am to have it: that is the fate to which I am condemned. But—' his lips snapped; resolution flamed in his eyes.

'Oh!' cried Katie. 'It is splendid! You must succeed. Oh! To be a great Statesman. Oh! There is only one thing better—to be a great Poet. You might be both.'

Geoffrey replied modestly that, although he had written verse, he hardly expected to accomplish both greatness in poetry and greatness as a legislator. The latter, he declared, would be good enough for him.

That was the secret which this young man confided to the girl. You must own that, for such a young man to reveal such a secret to this girl, on the very first evening that he met her, argues for the maiden the possession of sympathetic qualities quite above the common.

III

Five years change a boy of twenty into a mature man of twenty-five, and a *debutante* of seventeen into an old woman of twenty-two. The acknowledgment of such a fact may save the historian a vast quantity of trouble.

It was five years after the great event of the ball. The family cousin, Horace, of whom mention has been already made, was sitting in his chambers at ten or eleven in the evening. With him sat his friend Sir Geoffrey Armiger, a young man whom you have already met.

The death of his cousin had transformed him from a penniless youth into a baronet with a great estate (which might have been in Spain or Ireland for all the good it was), and with a great fortune in stocks. There was now no occasion for him to take the family living: that had gone to a deserving stranger; a clear field lay open for his wildest ambitions. This bad fortune to the cousin, who was still quite young, happened the year after the ball. Of course, therefore, the young man of vast ambition had already both feet on the ladder? You shall see.

'What are you going to do all the summer?' asked the family cousin, Horace.

'I don't know,' Geoffrey replied languidly. 'Take the yacht somewhere, I suppose. Into the Baltic, perhaps. Will you come too?'

'Can't. I've got work to do. I shall run over to Switzerland for three weeks perhaps. Better come with me and do some climbing.'

Geoffrey shook his head.

'Man!' cried the other impatiently, 'you want something to do. Doesn't it bore you—just going on day after day, day after day, with nothing to think of but your own amusement?'

Geoffrey yawned. 'The Profession of Amusement,' he said, 'is, in fact, deadly dull.'

'Then why follow it?'

'Because I am so rich. You fellows who've got nothing *must* work.

When a man is not obliged to work, there are a thousand excuses. I don't believe that I *could* work now if I wanted to. Yet I used to have ambitions.'

'You did. When it was difficult to find a way to live while you worked, you had enormous ambitions. "If only I was not obliged to provide for the daily bread"; that was what you used to say. Well, now the daily bread is provided, what excuse have you?'

'I tell you a thousand excuses present themselves the moment I think of doing any work. Besides, the ambitions are dead!'

'Dead! And at five-and-twenty! They can't be dead.'

'They are. Dead and buried. Killed by five years' racket. Profession of Pleasure—Pleasure, I believe they call it. No man can follow more than one profession.'

'Well, old man, if the world's pleasures are already rather dry in the mouth, what will they be when you've been running after them for fifty years?'

'There are cards, I believe. Cards are always left. No,'—he got up and leaned over the mantelshelf,—'I can't say that the fortune has brought much happiness with it. That's the worst of being rich. You see very well that you are not half so happy as the fellows who are making their own way, and yet you can't give up your money and start fair with the rest. I always think of that story of the young man who was told to give up all he had to the poor. He couldn't, you see. He saw very clearly that it would be best for him; but he couldn't. I am that young man. If I was like you, with all the world to conquer, I should be ten times as strong and a hundred times as clever. I know it—yet I cannot give up the money.'

'Nobody wants you to give it up. But surely you could go on like other fellows—as if you hadn't got it, I mean.'

'No—you don't understand. It's like a millstone tied round your neck. It drags you down and keeps you down.'

'Why don't you marry?'

'Why don't I? Well, when I meet the girl I fancy I will marry if she will have me. I suppose I'm constitutionally cold, because as yet— Who is this girl?' He took up a cabinet photograph which stood on the mantelshelf. 'I seem to know the face. It's a winning kind of face— what they call a beseeching face. Where have I seen it?'

‘That? It is the portrait of a cousin of mine. I don’t think you can have met her anywhere, because she lives entirely in the country.’

‘I have certainly seen her somewhere. Perhaps in a picture. Beatrice, perhaps. It is the face of an angel. Faces sometimes deceive, though: I know a girl in quite the smartest set who can assume the most saintly face when she pleases. She puts it on when she converses with the curate; when she goes to church she becomes simply angelic. At other times—Your cousin does not, however, I should say, follow the Profession of Amusement.’

‘Not exactly. She lives in a quiet little seaside place where they’ve got a convalescent home, and she slaves for the patients.’

‘It is a beautiful face,’ Geoffrey repeated. ‘But I seem to know it.’ He looked at the back of the photograph. ‘What are these lines written at the back?’

‘They are some nonsense rhymes written by herself. There is a little family tradition that Katie is waiting for her Prince—she says so herself

—she has refused a good many men. I think she will never marry, because she certainly will not find the man she dreams of.’

‘May I read the lines?’ He read them aloud:—

Oh! tell me, Willow-wren and White-throat, beating
    The sluggish breeze with eager homeward wing,
Bear you no message for me—not a greeting
    From him you left behind—my Prince and King?

You come from far—from south and east and west;
    Somewhere you left him, daring some great thing,

I know not what, save that it is the best:

Somewhere you saw him—saw my Prince and King.

You cannot choose but know him: by the crown

They place upon his head—the crown and ring;

And by the loud and many-voiced renown

After the footsteps of my Prince and King.

He speaks, and lo! the listening world obeys;

He leads, and all men follow; and they cling,

And hang around the words and works and ways,

As of a Prophet—of my Prince and King.

What matter if he comes not, though I wait?

Bear you no greeting for me, birds of spring?

Again—what matter, since his work is great,

And greater grows his name—my Prince and King.

'You see,' said the cousin, 'she has set up an ideal man.'

'Yes. Why does she call him her Prince?'

The cousin laughed. 'There is a story about a ball—her first ball— her last too, poor child, because—well, there were losses, you know. Like the landlady, Katie has known better days; and friends died, and so she lives by herself in this little village, and looks after her patient convalescents.'

‘What about her first ball?’

‘Well, she nearly missed it, because her godmother, who meant to give her a surprise, lost a train or got late somehow. So her Elder Sisters went without her, and she arrived late; and they said that, to complete the story, nothing was wanted but the Prince.’

Geoffrey started and changed colour.

‘That’s all. She imagined a Prince, and goes on with her dream. She enacts a novel which never comes to an end, and has no situations, and has an invisible hero.’

Geoffrey laid down the photograph. He now remembered everything, including the sending of the slipper. But the cousin had quite forgotten his own part in the story.

‘I must go,’ he said. ‘I think I shall take the yacht somewhere round the coast. You say your cousin lives at—’

‘Oh! Yes, she lives at Shellacomb Bay, near Torquay. Sit down again.’

‘No. Dull place, Shellacomb Bay: I’ve been there, I think.’ He was rather irresolute, but that was his way. ‘I must go. I rather think there are some men coming into my place about this time. There will be nap. All professionals, you know—Professors of Amusement. It’s dull work. I say, if your cousin found her Prince, what an awful, awful disappointment it would be!’

IV

At five in the morning Geoffrey was left alone. The night’s play was over. He turned back the curtains and opened the windows, letting in the fresh morning air of April. He leaned out and took a deep breath.

Then he returned to the room. The table was littered with packs of cards. There

was a smell of a thousand cigarettes. It is an acrid smell, not like the, honest downright smell of pipes and cigars; the board was covered with empty soda-water and champagne bottles.

'The Professional Pursuer of Pleasure', he murmured. 'It's a learned profession, I suppose. Quite a close profession. Very costly to get into, and beastly stupid and dull when you are in it. A learned profession, certainly.'

He sat down, and his thoughts returned to the girl who had made for herself a Prince. 'Her Prince!' he said bitterly. And then the words came back to him—

Daring some great thing,
I know not what, save that it is the best:
Somewhere you saw him—saw my Prince and King.

'For one short night I was her Prince and King,' he murmured. 'And I sent her the slipper—was stone-broke a whole term after through buying that slipper. And after all I was afraid to call at the house. Her Prince and King. I wonder—' He looked about him again—looked at the empty bottles. *'What* a Prince and King!' he laughed bitterly.

Then he sprang to his feet; he opened a drawer and took from it a bundle of letters, photographs, cards of invitation which were lying there piled up in confusion. He threw these on the fire in a heap; he opened another drawer and pulled out another bundle of notes and papers. These also he threw on the fire. 'There!' he said resolutely. What he meant I know not, for he did not wait to see them burned, but went into his bedroom and so to bed.

V

Geoffrey spoke no more than the simple truth when he said that Katie De Lisle had a saintly face—the face of an angel. It was a lovely face when he first saw it—the face of a girl passing into womanhood. Five years of tranquil life, undisturbed by strong emotions, devoted to unselfish labours and to meditation, had now made that face saintly indeed. It was true that she had created for herself a Prince, one who was at once a Galahad of romance and a leader of the present day, chivalrous knight and Paladin of Parliament. What she did with her Prince I do not know. Whether she thought of him continually or only seldom, whether she believed in him or only hoped for him, no one can tell. When a man proposed to her—which happened whenever a man was presented to her—she refused him graciously, and told her sisters, who were now matrons, that another person had come representing himself to be the Prince, but that she had detected an impostor, for he was not the Prince. And it really seemed as if she never would find this impossible Prince, which was a great pity, if only because she had a very little income, and the Elder Sisters, who lived in great houses, desired her also to have a great house. Of course, every Prince who regards his own dignity must have a big house of his own.

Now, one afternoon in April, when the sun sets about a quarter-past seven and it is light until eight, Katie was sitting on one of the benches placed on the shore for the convenience of the convalescents, two or three of whom were strolling along the shore. The sun was getting low; a warmth and glow lay upon the bay like an illuminated mist. Katie had a book in her hand, but she let it drop into her lap, and sat watching the beauty and the splendour and the colour of the scene before her. Then there came, rounding the southern headland, a steam yacht, which slowly crept into the bay, and dropped anchor and let off

steam: a graceful little craft, with her slender spars and her dainty curves. The girl watched with a little interest. Not often did craft of any kind put into that bay. There were bays to the east and bays to the west, where ships, boats, fishing smacks, and all kind of craft put in; but not in that bay, where there was no quay, or port, or anything but the convalescents, and Katie the volunteer nurse. So she watched, sitting on the bench, with the western sun falling upon her face.

After a little a boat was lowered, and a man and a boy got into it. The boy took the sculls and rowed the man ashore. The man jumped out, stood irresolutely looking about him, observed Katie on the bench, looked at her rather rudely it seemed, and walked quickly towards her. What made her face turn pale? What made her cheek turn red and pale? Nothing less than the appearance of her Prince—her Prince. She knew him at once. Her Prince! It was her Prince come to her at last.

But the Prince did not hold out both hands and cry, 'I have come.' Not at all. He gravely and politely took off his hat. 'Miss De Lisle,' he said. 'I cannot hope that you remember me. I only met you once. But I—I heard that you were here, and I remembered your face at once.'

'I seldom forget people,' she replied, rising and giving him her hand. 'You are Mr Geoffrey Armiger. We danced together one night. I remember it especially, because it was my first ball.'

'Which you nearly missed, and were left at home like Cinderella, till the fairy godmother came. I—I am cruising about here. I learned that you were living here from your cousin in the Temple, and—and I thought that, if we put in here, I might, perhaps, venture to call.'

'Certainly. I shall be very glad to see you, Mr Armiger. It is seven o'clock now. Will

you come to tea to-morrow afternoon?'

'With the greatest pleasure. May I walk with you—in your direction?' The situation was delicate. What Geoffrey wanted to convey was this: 'You once received the confidences of a young man who hoped to do great things in the world. You have gone on believing that he would do great things. You have built up an ideal man, before whom all other men are small creatures. Well, that ideal must be totally disconnected with the young fellow who started it, because he has gone to the bad. He is only a Professor of Amusement, an idle killer of time, a man who wastes all his gifts and powers.' A difficult thing to say, because it involved charging the girl with, or telling her he knew that she had been, actually thinking of him for five years.

That evening he got very little way. He reminded her again of the ball. He said that she had altered very little, which was true; for at twenty-two Katie preserved much the same ethereal beauty that she had at seventeen. That done, his jaws stuck, to use a classical phrase. He could say no more. He left her at the door of her cottage,—she lived in a cottage in the midst of tree fuchsias and covered with roses,—and went back to his yacht, where he had a solitary dinner and passed a morose evening.

At five o'clock in the afternoon next day he called again. Miss De Lisle was at the Home, but would come back immediately. The books on the girl's table betrayed the character of her mind. Katie's books showed the level of her thoughts and the standard of her ideals. They were the books of a girl who meditates. There are such people, even in this busy and noisy age. Geoffrey took them up with a sinking heart. Professors of Amusement never read such books.

Then she came in, quiet, serene; and they sat down, and the tea was brought in.

'Now, tell me,' she said abruptly. 'I see by your card that you have a title. What did

you do to get it?'

'Nothing. I succeeded.'

'Oh!' Her face fell a little. 'When I saw you—the only time that I saw you—I remember that you had great ambitions. What have you done?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. I have wasted my time. I have lived a life of what they call pleasure. I don't know that I ought to have called upon you at all.'

'Is it possible? Oh! Can it be possible? Only a life of pleasure? And you—you with your noble dreams? Oh! Is it possible?'

'It is possible. It is quite true. I am the prodigal son, who has so much money that he cannot get through it. But do you remember the silly things I said? Why, you see, what happened was, that when the temptation came all the noble dream vanished?'

'Is it possible?' she repeated. 'Oh! I am so very, very sorry!'—in fact, the tears came into her eyes. 'You have destroyed the one illusion that I nourished.' Every one thinks that he has only one illusion and a clear eye for everything else. That is the Great, the Merciful, Illusion. 'I thought that there was one true man at least in the world, fighting for the right. I had been honoured as a girl with the noble ambitions of that man when he was quite young. I thought I should hear of him from time to time winning recognition, power, and authority. It was a beautiful dream. It made me feel almost as if I were myself taking part in that great career, even from this obscure corner in the country. No one knows the pleasure that a woman has in watching the career of a brave and wise man. And now it is gone. I am sorry you called,'—her voice became stony and her eyes hard: even an angel or a saint has moments of righteous indignation,—'I am very sorry, Sir Geoffrey Armiger, that you took the trouble to call.'

Her visitor rose. 'I am also very sorry,' he said, 'that I have said or done anything to

pain you. Forgive me: I will go.'

But he lingered. He took up a paper-knife, and considered it as if it were something rare and curious. He laid it down. Then he laughed a little short laugh, and turned to Katie with smiling lips and solemn eyes.

'Did that slipper fit?' he asked, abruptly. She blushed. But she answered him.

'It was too small for my Elder Sisters, but it fitted me.'

'Will you try it on again?'

She went out of the room and presently returned with the pretty, jewelled, little slipper. She took off her shoe, sat down, and tried it on.

'You see,' she said, 'it is now too small for my foot. Oh! my foot has not changed in the least. It has grown too small.'

'Try again.' The Prince looked on anxiously. 'Perhaps, with a little effort, a little goodwill—'

'No; it is quite hopeless. The slipper has shrunk; you can see for yourself if you remember what it was like when you bought it. See, it is ever so much smaller than it was, Sir Geoffrey.' She looked up, gravely. 'See for yourself. And the silver buckle is black, and even the pearls are tarnished. See!' There was a world of meaning in her words. 'Think what it was five years ago.'

He took it from her hand and turned it round and round disconsolately.

'You remember it—five years ago—when it was new?' the girl asked again.

'I remember. Oh! yes, I remember. A pretty thing it was then, wasn't it? A world of promise in it, I remember. Hope, and courage, and—and all kinds of possibilities. Pity—silver gone black, pearls tarnished, colour faded, the thing itself shrunken. Yes.' He gave it back to her. 'I'm glad you've kept it.'

'Of course I kept it.'

'Yes, of course. Will you go on keeping it?'

'I think so. One likes to remember a time of promise, and of hope, and courage, and, as you say, all kinds of possibilities.'

He sighed.

'Slippers are so. There are untold sympathies in slippers. I call this the Oracle of the slipper. Not that I am in the least surprised. I came here, in fact, on purpose to ascertain, if I could, the amount of shrinkage. It would be interesting to return every five years or so, just to see how much it shrinks every year. Next time it would be a doll's shoe, for instance. Well, now'—again he fell back upon the paper-knife—'there was something else I had to say; something else—' He dropped his eyes and examined the paper-knife closely. 'The other day in your cousin's rooms I saw your photograph; and I remembered the kind of young fellow I was when we talked about ambitions and you sympathised with me. I think I should like to take up those ambitions again, if it is not too late. I am sick and weary of the Profession of Pleasure. I have wasted five good years, but perhaps they can be retrieved. Let me, if possible, burnish up that silver, expand the shrinking shoe, renew those dreams.'

'Do you mean it? Are you strong enough? Oh! You have fallen so low. Are you strong enough to rise?'

'I don't know. If the event should prove—if that slipper should enlarge again—if it should once more fit your foot—'

'If! Oh! how can a man say *if*, when he ought to say *shall*?'

'The slipper *shall* enlarge,' he said quietly, but with as much determination as one can expect from an Emeritus Professor of Pleasure.

'When it does, then come again. Till then, do not, if you please, seek me out in my

obscurity. It would only be the final destruction of a renewed hope. Farewell, Sir Geoffrey.'

'*Au revoir*. Not farewell.'

He stooped and kissed her hand and left her.

THE END.