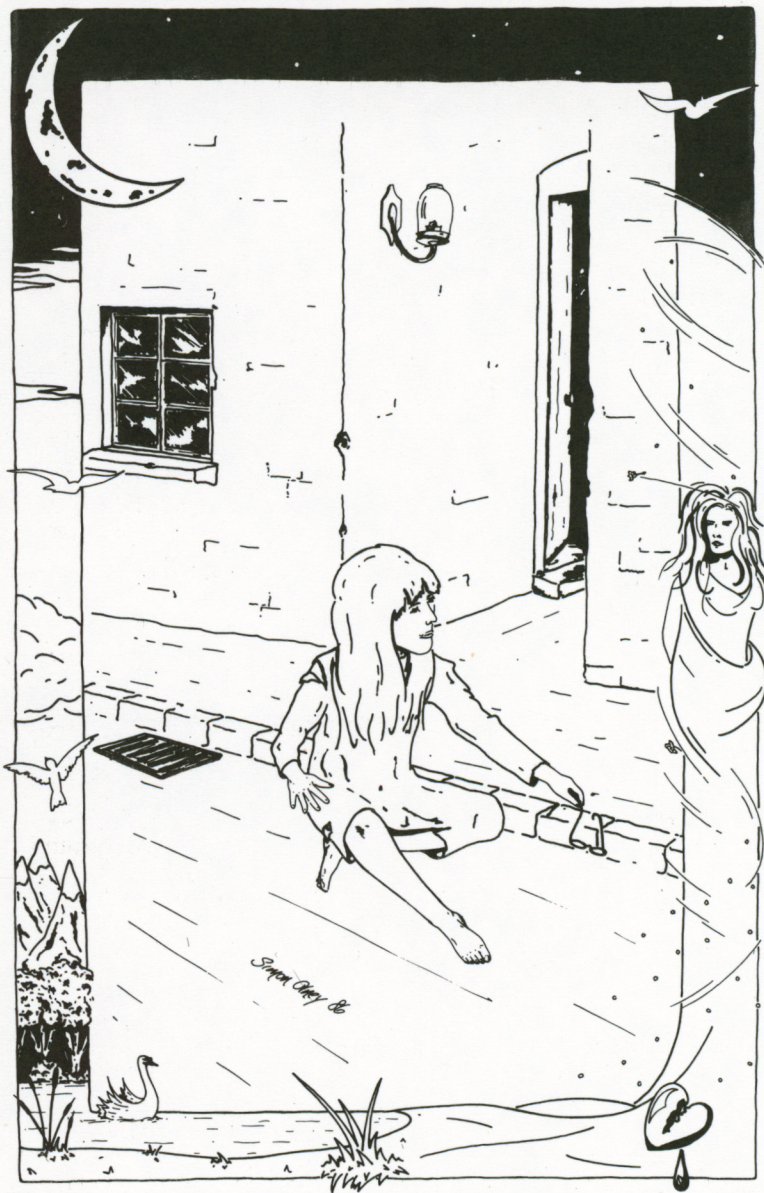


The Magic Spectacles
and Other Tales
by
Richard Cowper



THE MAGIC SPECTACLES

and Other Tales



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The Magic Spectacles

In the dusty storage chests of Time are hidden many strange and wonderful treasures. Some of these are of an intricacy that defies imagination and others so simple that one who did not know their hidden secret would pass them by as rubbish. Here are rings holding the power of invisibility: clocks which can take one to any point down the corridors of Time: swords which can vanquish whole armies: harps which can sing every song the world has ever known: pens and brushes which at a command can portray anything the owner desires, surpassingly well.

From time to time some of these treasures find their way into human hands. History is full of the deeds of the men who possessed them. Orpheus tuned the harp which later, David plucked for Saul. King Arthur, Roland, and Richard the Lion-Hearted all clasped the hilt of one of those magic swords. And the great Rembrandt acquired the brush with which Leonardo da Vinci had captured and imprisoned for all time the haunting smile of the Mona Lisa.

These treasures are world famed and lucky indeed is the person who wins one, for his name is engraved for ever on the Roll of Immortality. But what of the other gifts; those so ordinary in appearance and yet, in reality, so extraordinary? Yes, they too have had adventures, some of them indeed so strange that the tales of Orpheus' Harp and Arthur's Sword pale into insignificance beside them. Has not Hans Andersen recounted the adventures of those strange goloshes whose wearer could gratify his every whim? And they were but one of the mysterious treasures. There is a tattered cloak, torn, it is true, and riddled with many curious holes whose edges are oddly scorched, but who would guess that it held powers of protection

greater by far than any suit of armour? Who could divine that it is the identical robe Dante wore on his journeys to the nethermost regions of hell? Or there is an ordinary-looking walking stick, weathered black, with a handle worn smooth by the caress of a thousand hands. Just an ordinary-looking walking stick, and yet it has the gift of transporting its owner to any place in the world in the merest twinkling of an eye. And at the very bottom of the deepest chest lies what is perhaps the most astonishing treasure of all this vast and varied collection. It is a pair of spectacles. Their steel rims and ear-pieces are stained and battered and the lustre has long since departed from their cracked lenses. Unnoticed they lie in their forgotten corner, half-buried by the star-dust of the ages. And yet, did they wish it, they could tell as strange a tale as any of their more illustrious companions. For the wearer of those magic spectacles is endowed with the gift of Unequalled Perception. Only once have they appeared on earth, and that is the story you are about to hear.

Now the dispensation of the treasures of Time is the business of the Fairy of Fortune. Because long experience has taught her that many mortals are ready to misuse the gifts she brings them, she is nowadays more chary of distributing them than she was at one time, and gradually the treasures are accumulating again in the vaults of Time. But a hundred and fifty years ago, when she still had a little faith left in mankind, she made a visit to a country that would now be impossible to find on any map, but which was at that time a great centre of civilization. In her knapsack she placed, among other things, the Spectacles of Perception. Such a highly prized gift were they, that she was doubtful of ever finding a suitable recipient, and she had added them to her pack more in the nature of an afterthought than anything else.

When she reached her destination she started at once to dispense her wonderful gifts. A ring of invisibility here; an enchanted paint brush there; and so on and so forth, until all she had left were the Spectacles of Perception and two magic cloaks.

She wandered invisibly about the streets of the capital city wondering to whom she could give the cloaks—for she had long

since given up hope of ever finding a satisfactory owner for the spectacles—and at last she disposed of one to a young barrister. This was a cloak of oratory and the young man was to find it a great help in the world. The other she eventually deposited in a clothes shop and left it with her blessing. Then she took her leave of the city and sped back to her dwelling in the fields of Eternity.

Arriving home she removed her pack and felt inside for the spectacles. Imagine her consternation when she found that the most precious of all her gifts was no longer there!

Frantically she hunted in every conceivable nook and cranny but all to no avail. Slipping on her winged sandals she fled back along the path she had travelled but nowhere could she find as much as a clue to the whereabouts of the spectacles. So after fervently praying that wherever they were they would not be misused, she reluctantly made her way home once more.

*

What had happened to those elusive spectacles? The answer is as simple as anyone could guess. They had slipped unperceived into the folds of one of the magic cloaks and when the Fairy of Fortune gave the cloak away, the Spectacles of Perception dropped to the ground, to lie unnoticed in the gutter among the pattering feet of the passers-by.

It was not long before they were found. A little girl came hopping along the street, one foot on the pavement and the other in the gutter. Her dress was torn, her face was dirty and her eyes were large and brown, and when they saw the spectacles they seemed to grow even larger. But she just went on hopping along until she came to the spot where they lay, then quick as a thought she had scooped them up in her grubby hand and gone on hopping as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. And, as far as she was concerned, nothing out of the ordinary *had* happened. Every day it was her custom to roam about the streets of the city seeking whatever she could find. Sometimes she found a brooch, sometimes a glove or a purse, sometimes only a few buttons, but hardly a day passed in which she did not find something, and everything she found she sold to

an old man who kept a junk shop at the end of the street where she lived. From his point of view it was a very profitable business, for the child never knew the true value of the articles she took him and seemed content with the pence he gave her.

It was to this shop that she made her way with the spectacles.

'So, my dear? And what have you brought me today? Spectacles is it? Well, well now, and who do you think wants spectacles what are made for other eyes? Eh?'

The little girl said nothing. She hardly ever said anything.

'Well, well. She does not answer? Have you lost your tongue, my child?'

'How much?' demanded the little girl.

'Let me see,' said the old man slowly. 'The lenses have several scratches and the ear-pieces are a bit bent. I will give you three pence.'

'Four,' said the girl firmly.

'Four pence for these?' said the old man in astonishment.

'No, the child must be joking. Why they are almost falling apart. See, here—'

'Four,' said the child, and added as an afterthought, 'Peter's sick.'

'Oh, your brother is sick, hey?' said the old man. 'Well, that is a different matter, child. I give you what you ask. Just this once, mind you. Krauss is not a rich man.'

The girl silently held out her dirty palm and the old man dropped the coins into it one by one. As she turned to leave the shop, he called her back.

'Here child. For your brother. From old Krauss,' and he gave her two more coins. Her eyes went very large but she said nothing and scampered through the door, as though afraid he might take them from her again.

The old man smiled as he turned back into the shop, and slopped along the passage in his down-at-heel slippers. He still held the spectacles in his hand and as he shuffled along he polished them absentmindedly on his jacket. Entering his dingy living room he stood for a moment as though trying to make up his mind about something. Then he noticed the spectacles in his hand. He was about to lay them down when an impulse made

him take off his own spectacles and slip on the new ones in their place. For a moment he wriggled them up and down on his nose, then turned to look at himself in the mirror.

What he saw nearly made him bolt from the room in fright. Confronting him in the glass was not one Krauss, but two!—and each was different!

Gradually the old man collected his scattered wits and removed the spectacles with a trembling hand. The two images vanished immediately. Reassured, he tried once more, and again the same thing happened. This time, however, he was prepared for it and proceeded to examine the two reflected Krausses.

At first he could not make out what it was that distinguished them. They were both dressed alike; they both stood in the same way; what was it then? Peering closely, he saw that the difference lay in the expression of the mouths and eyes and in the hands. One image, by far the stronger of the two, appeared to stand a little in front of the other. The lips of this Krauss were hard and thin; the eyes shifty and cruel. He was, the old man decided, utterly without pity, grasping, and mean; in fact a thoroughly despicable character. The other one although outwardly identical in all respects with the first, was a totally different person when you came to examine him carefully. His lips, though obviously old, were still full, and the ghost of a smile seemed to hover perpetually about them. The eyes too were shining, but this time with happiness and not with avarice. Seeing him, Krauss could not help smiling, and as he did so the two images smiled back. But what a wealth of difference lay in those two smiles! One was full and happy and spread like warm butter across its face—Krauss loved to see that smile—but the other was nothing more than a wrinkling of the lip, in fact it was not a smile at all but a leer, and a very ugly leer at that. Instinctively Krauss felt his morning had been spoilt just by seeing it.

He knew that these two figures were both aspects of his own character; what he could not understand was why he had always admired the worse one and despised the other. He prided himself upon being a good business man and cursed his spontaneous

generosity for the weakness of a fool. Yet how glad he was now that he had sometimes been generous. 'How terrible,' he reflected, 'to have been confronted only by the image of cruelty,' and he felt quite ill at the thought.

And these strange spectacles which looked so ordinary but behaved so strangely. Where had the child found them? Did anyone else know of their extraordinary properties? He removed them from his nose and looked at them again. They *looked* just like other pairs of spectacles. He had many similar pairs in his own stock, yet without trying on the others he knew that these were the only ones which held the strange quality of perception.

'The good God be praised that they have come to me!' he cried joyfully, and taking the spectacles from the table he carried them carefully through into the shop and placed them on the high shelf where he kept his money bags. 'Every day I shall look at myself and see how much better I have become,' he crowed, and snatching up one of his leather bags he ran out into the street to find people in need of charity.

*

Unfortunately, in his excitement the old man quite forgot to lock up his shop, and not everyone had looked at themselves through the revealing lenses of the Spectacles of Perception. The owner of the eyes which observed the old man running down the street certainly had not, and as he was the next person to possess the wonderful spectacles, it will perhaps be as well to forget old Krauss and turn our attention upon his watcher.

There he stood in the shadows, a tall thin young man, whose jacket was buttoned right up to the neck and whose breeches had known far better days. For a week he had watched old Krauss from this dark archway until he knew the old man's habits nearly as well as he did his own. What is more, he knew the shelf where the old man kept his money. As soon as Krauss had vanished round the corner of the street, the young man stepped casually across the road, glanced to left and right to see if he was observed, and slipped into the deserted shop. In a trice the old

man's remaining money bags were in his pocket, and tangled unnoticed in the strings of one of them were the magic spectacles.

Closing the shop door softly behind him the young man walked swiftly down the street in the opposite direction to that taken by Krauss, turning corners here and there and even doubling back once or twice in his tracks to outwit a possible pursuer. He need not have bothered; no one was aware of the robbery, least of all the robbed.

Once or twice he had to stop and regain his breath, and each time he was overcome by the most terrible fits of coughing. His thin frame shook as though it might burst apart and he had to lean against the wall for support. Eventually, after many such pauses, he reached a large tumble-down house in another part of the city. Without bothering to knock he thrust open the door and, leaving it to swing slowly shut behind him, started up the stairs. Up and up he climbed until at last he reached the top of the house and stood facing a small scarred door. There he paused until the loud thumping of his heart gradually subsided and his wheezing breath came more slowly. The house was as still as a calm night. Moving forward he knocked three times on the tiny door. From inside came the muffled scrape of a chair being pushed back. Bolts grated in their fastenings. The door opened an inch and an eye scrutinized him. 'It's all right. It's me—Franz,' he said. The door swung open and he stepped down into a dark room.

'Did you get it?' asked a voice.

'Yes,' he said slowly. 'I got it.'

'Did anyone see you? Were you chased? How much is there?' Questions were flung at him from the shadows. Only one voice, a girl's, said: 'Let him sit down and rest. He's worn out.'

The young man dropped gratefully into a proffered chair and told them what had taken place.

There was a long silence when he had finished, then a man's voice said: 'Let's see how much there is.'

The young man put his hand into his pocket and pulling out the bags threw them on to the table. 'Hel-lo,' exclaimed a voice, 'you've got a pair of the old devil's specs as well. Here Franz,

keep them as a souvenir,' and the Magic Spectacles were flung into the young man's lap. His long fingers closed about them automatically.

There were five people in the little room. Four men and a girl. All were young. Three were students at the city's University and members of a secret organization which aimed at overthrowing the government. Only Franz, the young man who had stolen the money, was not a student. He was the leader of the organization. The girl was his sister.

When the money had been sorted out into piles and its total entered in a book, the three students rose from their seats and, with whispered assurances that they would return that evening, left the room one at a time. The young man sat on in silence, his head laid back in the chair, his eyes closed.

Softly the girl spoke: 'I'm glad you succeeded, Franz.'

At her words the young man's eyes blinked open. He smiled. 'I'm glad it's over,' he said. 'I hated doing it—even from an old rascal like Krauss. But there it is . . .' and he shrugged his thin shoulders.

The girl came forward and sat on the arm of his chair. 'Poor Franz,' she said and ran her fingers through his ruffled hair. Her eye alighted on the spectacles and taking them from his hand she slipped them on, murmuring: 'Do I look like old Krauss?'

She turned towards her brother and a look of pain and terror flashed across her face. Snatching off the spectacles she threw herself into his arms, crying as if her heart would break.

'What is it, Karen? What is it then?' he asked, stroking her black hair tenderly. But she only cried: 'No, no, *no*,' and hid her face in his coat.

'What has frightened you? Why do you cry so?' he asked again. 'There, there, *mutterchen*. I am safe. I am all right. There, there, there.'

'Oh Franz,' she wept. 'Oh Franz—'

'Yes? Yes, little one?'

He lifted her head and kissed the glittering tears from her closed eyes. Slowly she opened them, as though fearful of what she might see. But facing her was only her brother's quizzical face—the glasses lay upon the floor.

Gradually the fright died in her eyes and she stroked his face with her wondering fingers.

'Oh Franz,' she breathed. What happened? Why—?'

'That's for *me* to ask,' he laughed. 'Did you see a ghost or something?' and he took her affectionately into his thin arms and held her very tightly.

Had she seen a ghost? she wondered. A ghost of her darling Franz? How else could she explain the still body she had seen lying there in the chair with a thread of scarlet on its white lips; the lines of pain so deeply drawn into its face?

'It was a ghost,' she said, and shuddered again. 'I saw it through those glasses.'

'Eh?' Franz leant forward in the chair and retrieved the spectacles from the floor. 'You saw a ghost through old Krauss's specs? Let's have a look.'

Instinctively his sister put out a hand to stop him but with a laugh he held down her arm and slipped the spectacles on to his nose.

Putting his head on one side he surveyed her apprehensive face. 'I see no ghost, *mutterchen*,' he said. 'True, you look a little older, but that is the light. In fact you are more adorable than ever. Your ghost must have been that cheese you are always nibbling,' and laughing loudly at his joke he bounced her up and down on his knee as though she were a small baby.

'Have another look, baby,' he said.

His sister shook her head and smiled at him fondly. 'Once is enough for me,' she said. But she could not forget what she had seen. A tiny fear had seeded in her heart; soon it would put out roots.

Later, when her brother had left the room, the girl took the spectacles and put them in a drawer. But she could not hide from herself the fear in her heart and every time she heard Franz coughing, the memory of what she had seen came rushing back with redoubled force. Phrases that she had heard the students use from time to time whispered cruelly in her ears. 'Franz works so hard he will burn himself out.' 'That cough of his will be the death of him.' 'He's never been strong.' And all at once she lost her faith in the organization. It seemed to her that it had

changed into a fearsome kind of ogre who was trying to steal her Franz away from her. When she told him of her fears for his health, he only smiled. 'We will go away for a holiday in the Summer, Karen,' he would say. 'Right away up into the mountains and forget all about the organization and the revolution. Just you and I. How would you like that, eh?' and he would pull a lock of her hair.

But Summer passed and still they stayed. Franz now coughed so frequently that no one except his sister commented upon it and the exacting work for the revolution went on as before.

Then one afternoon the girl arrived home and found Franz lying back in the armchair and two of the students bending over him. But it was not this that frightened her. On his forehead, knocked askew as though he had tried to wrench them off, were the Spectacles of Perception.

She flung herself down beside him. 'What happened? What have you done to him?' she cried.

'We did nothing, Karen. He has fainted, I think.'

'But the glasses! Why is he wearing those glasses?' she cried, and seizing a jug of water from the table she dipped a corner of her shawl and began wiping her brother's pale face.

The young students watched her helplessly.

'He had them on when I came in a moment ago,' stammered one of them. 'He turned towards me and said: "You too, Karl?" and then he fell. We lifted him into the chair and then you came in.'

But the girl was not listening. '*Franz, Franz, Franz,*' she called softly, and very slowly the young man's eyelids opened. 'The glasses, Karen; the glasses. You were right.'

'What happened, dear one? Tell me what happened.'

'They no longer believe,' he whispered painfully. 'They think the revolution will fail; they think—'

'Yes, yes?'

'They think I am dying, *mutterchen.*'

He moved his head to seek her eyes the more clearly, and as he did so the forgotten spectacles slipped down his forehead on to his nose and he saw his sister through their appallingly honest lenses.

Swiftly she snatched them from his face but it was too late. A

look of pain and terrible surprise flickered over his eyes. 'Karen. Oh, *Karen*,' he murmured and his head fell back into the chair. His eyes closed.

Even as she watched, unable to move for her terror and sorrow, she saw a thread of crimson blood fleck across his lips. Franz and the ghost she had once seen through the Spectacles of Perception had become one and the same. Slowly she dropped her face into her hands and wept.

She was roused by a student's hand on her shoulder. 'Karen,' he was saying, 'Karen, is Franz dead?'

Dumbly she nodded her head.

'What did he mean about the spectacles, Karen?' the boy asked. He had picked them up and was looking at them wonderingly.

She lifted her tear-stained face in time to see him raise them towards his eyes.

'No! No!' she screamed, and scrambling to her feet, snatched them from his hand and flung them with all the strength of her arm through the tiny window. The students gazed fearfully at her. They felt quite sure she had gone mad.

*

The spectacles fell in a glittering arc, but whether because of their magic qualities or by some whim of chance they did not fall on the street and break. No, they dropped straight into the lap of a young lady who was out taking the afternoon air in her carriage, accompanied by her mama.

'Heaven preserve us!' she cried. 'A pair of spectacles! How careless some people are,' and she gazed upwards to see where they had come from. But by this time the carriage had moved on and they were no longer beneath the window where the young revolutionary lay dead.

'Sit still child! You look most unbecoming stretching your neck like that. What is the matter?' said the girl's mother who had seen nothing of what had taken place.

'Nothing, Mama,' said the blushing girl, and she concealed the spectacles beneath her small gloved hand.

The carriage rolled on.

'To the park, Charles,' commanded the old lady.

'Yes, milady,' said the uniformed servant and flicked his long whip over the backs of the two lovely horses.

'Perhaps we shall see that handsome Mr. D'Orley,' said the old lady. 'I hope you haven't forgotten what I told you, Arabella.'

'No, Mama,' said the girl meekly.

'That's good. I did so want you to make a good impression. The first impression is always the most important. Remember that, Arabella. The *first* impression.'

'Yes, Mama.'

Soon they were bowling down the wide carriage drive in the park. On either side, elegantly dressed young men nodded to them or lifted their canes in salutation. Although the girl smiled demurely and nodded her head gracefully, her restless eyes were searching the crowd for someone she apparently could not find.

'Stop, Charles,' commanded the old lady, and the carriage dutifully drew to a halt beside another.

'Good afternoon, Lady Pfalz. Good afternoon, Arabella,' came a chorus of voices and the old lady was soon deep in conversation with a crony.

Her daughter listened politely for a time but her attention soon wandered back to the changing faces in the park. Suddenly her eyes lit up as she caught sight of the face she sought. After first glancing round to see if her mother was looking, she waved her hand. A young officer detached himself from a bunch of other people and sauntered over the grass towards the carriage.

Unfortunately Lady Pfalz happened to turn her head just at that moment.

'Oh *dear*,' she clucked in annoyance, 'Here's that dreadful Captain Säbel. *And* he's seen us! Arabella this is *your* doing.'

'Oh, *Mama*,' said the girl in a shocked tone. But it was too late. The handsome captain was already at the carriage. 'Good afternoon, Lady Pfalz. Good afternoon, Arabella. I do hope I'm not intruding. Lovely weather for an afternoon drive, Lady Pfalz.'

His self-assurance always irritated Lady Pfalz. 'Do you think so?' she said coldly.

'Why, yes, of course I do,' he chattered amiably. 'Birds singing; blue sky; the ball tonight. What more could a soul wish for? What do you think, Arabella?'

'Oh, I *love* it,' said the girl impulsively, but in deference to her Mama quickly modified this to, 'at least, I *quite* love it.'

'What *do* you mean, child? Speak sense for heaven's sake. People will be saying my daughter's an imbecile.'

'Arabella means she loves it, but not *quite* as much as the Summer,' explained Captain Säbel. 'Isn't that so, Arabella?'

'Thank you, Captain,' said Lady Pfalz coldly, while Arabella nodded approval. 'But I should hardly have thought I needed to have my own daughter's words translated for me. Good-day Captain. Drive on, Charles!'

'See you at the ball tonight,' called Säbel after the retreating carriage.

'I hope he's no friend of *yours*, Arabella,' said Lady Pfalz disapprovingly. "'Arabella *means* she loves it". Fiddlesticks! The impudence! I shall see he does not dance with you tonight. *What*, child? *Sulking*?' And the old lady chuckled sourly to herself as the carriage rolled out of the park and headed for their home.

When they arrived, Arabella went straight upstairs to her bedroom. She put her gloves and the spectacles down on the dressing table and started rummaging in a drawer. After some trouble she drew forth an envelope, and from it extracted a small portrait. Holding it at arm's length she said: 'She says I am not to dance with you tonight, my dearest, but nothing on earth could stop me. And I thought you were *wonderful* in the park and of *course* that was *just* what I meant to say.' Then she kissed the picture fondly and replacing it in the drawer, picked up the spectacles.

'I wonder who threw *you* into my lap,' she mused, for she had a habit of addressing articles as though they were persons. 'It was lucky you didn't drop on Mama or there *would* have been a commotion. Still, I wish you had been a rose and that some handsome young man had kissed you and then flung you into my carriage as a token of undying love,' and she sighed deeply, for she was at the age when roses and moonlight and handsome

young men were the only things worth living for. 'However,' she continued, 'I might as well try you on, if only to see how glad I shall be that I don't have to wear glasses.' So saying she unfolded the spectacles and slipping them on her dainty little nose, turned to the mirror.

'How odd,' she murmured. 'Why, I look *quite* different. I should never have thought glasses would change me so. It makes me feel sad even to see myself.' And sure enough her image did look sad. But it was the kind of sadness that many people have—the sadness of disillusion. She took off the glasses and looked again. 'That's better,' she smiled, 'I could almost have believed I was growing sadder and sadder. How awful!' And putting the spectacles down on the dressing table, she went to take another look at her dress for the evening ball.

Lady Pfalz believed in making what she called 'fashionable late entrances' and by the time she and Arabella arrived, the ball was in full swing. Captain Säbel caught sight of them at once and had started to intercept them when he caught a cautionary glance from Arabella and turned back. Lady Pfalz had not yet noticed him.

After exchanging pleasantries with host and hostess, Arabella allowed herself to be led on to the dance floor and was soon twisting elegantly in a minuet. As Säbel moved round her in a complicated figure, she just had time to whisper: 'I'll see you on the terrace after supper,' before she was whisked back by her partner.

Under the watchful eye of Lady Pfalz she was afraid to dance with her sweetheart, but as soon as supper was over she invented an excuse and slipped out on to the terrace.

Before she had time to turn round Säbel was at her side. Together, they moved away from the lighted window, down the wide steps into the garden. As they reached the bottom step, Arabella tripped over her long skirt and stumbled forward. She regained her balance but in doing so, dropped her vanity bag and its contents spilled out upon the grass. Captain Säbel bent to pick them up. Suddenly he straightened.

'What's this, Arabella? Spectacles?'

'Yes, darling,' and she explained how she had found them.

'Would you like to try them on?' she teased. 'I'm sure they'd suit you, perfectly.'

'Most certainly not,' said the gallant Säbel, his vanity a little wounded. 'I say that a man who wears glasses is little better than a blind man.'

'What nonsense,' said Arabella. 'See, I look perfectly all right in the wretched things,' and just to tease him she slipped them on her nose and looked him up and down. She soon took them off!

'Robert,' she said wonderingly, 'you *do* love me, don't you?'

Säbel was used to this kind of thing. 'Of course I do, sweetheart. Why do you need to ask?'

'Well, you looked at me so strangely. Just as if—'

'Yes, my love, just as if what?'

'Oh, I know this will sound silly to you, Robert, but, just as though you were, well, weighing me in a set of scales.'

'Eh? "*Set of scales*", my precious?'

'Well—Oh don't let's think about it any more, dear heart. I was just being silly, that's all.'

'But what a strange thing to say,' pursued Säbel.

'I know it was, dearest. I shouldn't have said it. Let's go in now.'

'But we've only just come out, Arabella. You *are* behaving strangely tonight. Tell me, have I offended you in some way?'

'No, Robert, not exactly, but—'

'But what, dearest one?'

'Oh, it's no use. Take me in please, Robert.'

As they walked back up the steps, the moon shone in the lenses of the discarded spectacles until they seemed to wink wickedly after the departing couple.

That night Arabella looked at herself in the glass once more. The doubt that was in her heart showed plainly in her face and the form it took was a sad one. She wept long into the night.

*

The wind found the spectacles lying on the dewy lawn and hastened to tell the Fairy of Fortune. Down she flew, just in time

to snap them up from beneath the very nose of an astonished gardener. 'Got you at last, you wretches,' she breathed triumphantly, and holding them tightly, flew back to the vaults of Time. She dropped them into the deepest storage chest of all, and there I can assure you they have lain ever since.

The King and The Swan

Once upon a time there lived a king who was reputed to be the wisest man in the whole world. He knew what went on in every corner of his kingdom from the love of the poorest labourer for his master's daughter, to what the Grand Vizier had for his Sunday breakfast. His people loved him dearly for although he knew all their bad habits and their failings he never spoke of them to anyone and just went on getting wiser and wiser until at last he knew everything there was to know. Then he decided to take a holiday.

He told the Grand Vizier to govern the country for a few weeks and, summoning his counsellors, informed them that they were to obey the Grand Vizier because their king was going away for a short time. All the counsellors bowed their heads and said, 'Your Majesty, we will guard your interests as you have ordered and will obey the Grand Vizier as you have commanded.' Then the trumpeters blew a fanfare on their silver trumpets and the audience was at an end.

When they had gone the king packed his civilian clothes in an old trunk and left the city next morning by the early coach. He was not wearing his crown or his regal robes because he did not really like people prostrating themselves in the mud and begging to be allowed to kiss his hand. Besides, his crown and robes were not very comfortable. The palace cook had packed him up some sandwiches and as he ate them he stared out of the window and watched the countryside go by. He felt very happy.

When the coach arrived at the foot of the mountains the king climbed out and after stretching himself to get rid of his stiffness, paid his fare and asked the coachman to be so good as to leave his trunk at the nearby inn. Then he waved goodbye and walked off

towards the woods while the horses started up again and the coach bowled off down the road in a cloud of dust.

When he reached the fringe of the wood the king sat down under a tree and ate his last sandwich. Then he scraped a little hole in the ground with a stick and buried the paper, because he remembered the Counsellor for Civic Affairs had been very worried at the amount of litter lying around the parks and had asked him to publish a proclamation about it.

The sun shone through the trees and fell in pools of gold on the dead leaves. Little white clouds scudded across the deep blue of the sky, and the king thought he had never seen anything so beautiful. He sat at the foot of the tree and listened to the birds singing and the breeze laughing in and out among the branches and he wondered if perhaps he would not have been happier just as an ordinary person instead of having to govern the whole country.

While he sat dreaming like this a sparrow flew down and started pecking at the crumbs that had fallen from the sandwich. the king watched him for a moment, smiling, and then said, 'Tell me, little sparrow, do you not think the trees and the sun and the clouds are the most beautiful things you have ever seen?'

The sparrow was very surprised at hearing a man talk to him in his own language, but he coughed politely to cover his embarrassment and said, 'Well, when they all work together as they are doing today it is indeed beautiful, but more often one or the other is sulking and then it is not so nice.' Then he coughed once more and said, 'Pardon my ignorance, sir, but—your talking our language—are you not the king?' The king smiled again and said that it was indeed the case. The little sparrow hopped up and down and became more nervous than ever, but the king put him at ease by saying that he did not expect to be recognised as he was on holiday and not wearing his robes of state. Then they chatted for a while and the sparrow told the king that he had a cousin living in the city who had been present at the Jubilee but who had not actually conversed with His Majesty, and the king nodded gravely and said he would be sure to keep a look out for him when he went back to the palace. Finally, after he had enquired politely how long the king was

staying and had told him about the inn, the little sparrow took his leave and flew home bursting with pride and excitement to tell his wife about the meeting. The king sighed once or twice, then climbed to his feet and set off towards the inn.

He had not been given a very nice room because the landlord did not think he was anyone important, but the king did not mind much, for the food was well cooked and his host was good company.

He soon settled down to enjoy his holiday. After breakfast he used to ask the cook to pack him up some lunch and then he would put on his stoutest boots and go for walks either up into the mountains or through the forest to the little lake. He did not see his little friend the sparrow although he kept a sharp look out for him and he wondered where he could have got to. After a time he noticed that when the birds saw him coming they would fly away and gather in the tops of the trees chattering and twittering to themselves, for all the world as if they were conspirators. However hard the king strained his ears he could never quite catch what they were saying. But the sun still shone and the trees and the sky were as lovely as ever and he soon ceased to worry about the birds, being lost in the beauty of all the things around him.

At night he would lie awake listening to the nightingales singing in the lilac bushes round the lawn. So wonderful was their music that he was almost afraid to go to sleep lest he should miss a song more beautiful than that which preceded it, but he always did drop off in the end, for his walking made him tired. When he talked to the landlord about the nightingales the good man said he had never known anything like it in his life: adding that they always used to sing in the forest and never bother about the inn. And this made the king happier than ever, for he realized that he had taken his holiday at just the right season.

But at last the time came when the king had to tell the landlord that he would be leaving on the following day. So the cook packed up a special parcel of sandwiches and put in a piece of plum cake, and feeling very sad the king went out. But the day was so lovely that before long he was singing at the top of his voice just to let the world know how happy he was.

It seemed as though he had only been out a little while before he noticed that the sun had turned crimson and was beginning to slip down into her soft bed of clouds. Then he realized that the day was indeed over and walked sadly back to the inn.

After supper he went up to his bedroom and opening the window, leaned out, in order that he might catch the song of the nightingales more clearly than ever before. But alas, although the moon shone with all her summer brilliance over the lawn and the lilac bushes not a nightingale was to be heard. The king was so disappointed that he almost cried. Slowly he pulled the curtains across the window and, walking over to his bed sat down, resting his chin on his hands and thinking that surely in the whole world there could not be a person so unhappy as he.

Just as he was beginning to feel that he could restrain his tears no longer he heard a tap at the window and a small voice said, 'Your Majesty?' He jumped up and ran across the room. 'Why,' he cried, 'it is my little friend the sparrow! How are you and where have you been? I have not seen you in the forest since the day I arrived.' The sparrow thanked the king for remembering him and then coughed for he was not very good at making speeches. 'Your Majesty,' he said, 'I have come tonight to bring you an invitation from the birds of the forest to attend a little concert they are giving in your honour. We would be most honoured by your presence.'

The king smiled to himself and thought, 'Oh! So *that's* what they've been up to, is it?' Then he turned to the little sparrow and said he would be delighted to attend the concert, but how would he find his way? The sparrow fluttered his wings impatiently and said that if His Majesty would be so kind as to go down to the inn gate he would meet him there and conduct him to the concert personally. The king said he would go directly and, pausing only to pull on his boots, crept as quietly as he could down the stairs and out into the yard where the sparrow was waiting.

The moon was lighting up the forest like a great lamp and a thousand stars were dancing diamonds in the velvet of the sky when the king arrived at a small clearing beside the lake. There was a great deal of twittering among the smaller birds but this

died like the rustle of leaves after a breeze as he stepped forward into the moonlight and addressed them.

'My friends,' he said, 'often I have to make speeches before a great number of people about things in which I am not very interested. Tonight this is not the case. When I first met my little friend the sparrow I was enthralled with the beauty of the day, now I know this will be as nothing beside the beauty with which you will enrich the night. My friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.'

The birds whistled and chirped for fully five minutes after the speech, but at last the sparrow managed to make himself heard and announced the first item.

From that moment on the king was lost in a delirium of beautiful sound such as no one had ever heard before and none have ever heard since. Nightingales, pigeons, robins, finches, all sang as they had never sung in their lives, and the wind died before their music and two large silver tears rolled down the face of the moon and fell into the sea, while the animals crept out of their lairs and paused in the dark to listen.

The king was sitting on a little willow-stump that leant out over the still water at the edge of the lake, lost in a trance, when he felt something as soft as child's breath against his hand. Looking down he saw a beautiful swan had come gliding in towards the shore enchanted by the singing. The king feeling sorry for her, asked her why she too was not taking part in the concert but she only shook her head dumbly and overcome with misery, swam off to hide her shame among the reeds, while the king sank once more into his delicious reverie.

But at last the concert came to an end and the wind waking from its dream stirred the ripples of the lake and shook the leaves on the trees and the birds got ready to depart to their nests. The king stood up wondering where he could find words to express his gratitude. Then, just as he was about to speak, he heard a sound. So soft and sweet it was that he half wondered if he had heard it at all but it came again, louder, and the birds fell silent and one whispered that it was a lost angel crying to go home and another that it was the moon singing the stars to sleep. Then an old owl who was reputed to be the wisest bird in the whole

forest said, 'Hush my children and listen; it is the swan!' And the birds whispered, 'Yes, the swan! It is the swan!'

Then out over the sleeping lake the swan unlocked her lovely throat and sang. Faintly at first as though she was wandering in the dim mists of Time itself, then more strongly and the golden notes poured out and fled across the still water until the stars ceased to twinkle and the birds bowed their heads in wonder at the beauty of her voice. She sang of Life and Death and of Joy and Sorrow and of the beauty of the old world and the wonder of the new. She sang with the voice of a thousand harps and the trembling echo of a thousand golden bells and the forest held its breath in awe for never had it heard music like this. Out of the shadow of the reeds she swam, her dark eyes fixed upon the king and she sang for him alone. Right up to his feet she came and laying her breast against the bank, lowered her wonderful head until it touched his feet, and then she ceased. Slowly, as though in a dream, the king bent and touched her but her heart was broken and he knew she would sing no more.

For a long time he stood looking down upon the white form at his feet. And the birds, aware of his grief, flew silently away. Then he raised his head and, looking up at the moon, he said, 'Until this moment I believed I knew all there was to know in the world, but now I have heard the song of the swan I know that beside its beauty my wisdom is as nothing and my wealth but as dust. I ask witness to my words. Never so long as I live or my sons and their sons live shall anyone harm one of these birds. From this time on they shall belong to the king alone.' And the wind whispered through the trees and rushes and said, 'Your Majesty, I witness your pledge.'

And that is why in that country to this day all the swans belong to the king and no one is allowed to kill them.

The Snowman

All night the snow fell and in the morning when the sun rose over the edge of the world it illuminated a different land. Everywhere the scarred earth was covered in a white mantle. There was no leaf that did not bear its own jacket of finely powdered crystal and the early sunbeams scattered long lines of twinkling diamonds across the fields.

By and by the children came out and marvelled at the new scene. 'Let us make a snowman,' they said. 'That is just the thing to do on a day like this.' Straight away they set themselves to rolling huge balls of snow across the field and gradually the Snowman began to be born. By the time the sun was half way up the sky the Snowman could boast quite a reasonable shadow and when at last the children had to go home he was all complete except for his eyes. One of the children ran off and found two round black pebbles. 'These will make capital eyes,' he said and stuck them into the Snowman's face. 'Now he can see as well as we can,' the children cried, and wishing him a good night they scampered away over the hill to their homes.

As soon as he received his eyes, the Snowman became alive. True, he could not move from the place where he stood, but he could at least look in front of him and see all that was going on there. He saw the children as they bade him goodnight, but he did not know that it was they who had made him the way he was. For all he knew he had lived in that field under the evening sky all his life—which was indeed perfectly true.

'What a strange place this world is,' he thought. 'So cold and white. Only the wind ever says anything and he never sings a very cheerful song,' and he began to wonder whether he was not perhaps the only living creature. For already the children had

become a vague memory, he had known them so short a time.

But as the sun slowly slid down the sky behind him and his shadow grew ever longer and fainter across the trampled snow the Snowman began to grow a little fearful. 'Tell me,' he cried to the wind as it whistled past him, 'why is the light fading away? Will it ever return? Shall I be left here forever in the darkness?' But the wind only laughed and blew the powdered snow into his face. 'It would be better for you if it was always night,' it said, 'for with the day comes the sun and with the sun comes the warmth and you will melt away and die,' and he dashed blustering about his chilly business, leaving the Snowman to weep cold lonely tears.

'If only I knew how long the night would last,' he thought miserably. 'I could at least prepare myself for my certain fate,' though how he would have proposed to do this is not for us to inquire. But as the minutes turned to hours and the sun did not reappear the Snowman began to regain heart. 'After all,' he reasoned, 'why should the wind know anything about a Snowman? I'll wager he's never seen one in his life before; certainly there are none about here. Obviously he was just trying to frighten me,' and he grew quite cheerful at the thought of how silly he had been to take notice of such an old gossip.

Suddenly the clouds parted and the round moon peered down. 'Oh, oh, oh,' cried the Snowman, all his newly acquired courage draining away, 'the wind was right after all. I am melting; I am dying.' And surely enough two huge tears rolled down his sad face and froze upon his chin.

'Good heavens! What on earth are you blubbering about, you great oaf?' inquired an unsympathetic moonbeam, alighting on the snow before him. But the Snowman only gulped between his sobs, 'All right, I'm ready to go. Melt me now if you like.'

'What *are* you talking about?' the moonbeam asked. 'Who said I was going to melt you? Why, I couldn't even if I wanted to.' And just to show what she meant she shone full on the Snowman's face.

'Why,' he said in astonishment, 'you aren't hot at all! What a fool I was to believe the wind,' and he told the moonbeam all about it.

How she laughed! 'I'm not a sunbeam,' she gasped. 'That's the *moon* up there. The sun's round on the other side of the world now and having a gay old time of it I don't doubt.'

'But will he be back?' asked the anxious Snowman.

'Of course, you silly,' said the moonbeam, and explained to the amazed Snowman just how the sun and moon changed places during the night.

'And will I be melted and die?' he wanted to know.

'Oh well, all you earth-things have to die sooner or later, but it's not nearly as bad as everyone makes out. Come to think of it I often wish *I* could die, instead of having to run backwards and forwards all the time. It would be a pleasant change after a thousand million years.' But as the Snowman had no idea how long even one year was, the remark lost most of its point. However, he agreed politely, and was about to ask how long it would be before the sun did re-appear when the moon vanished behind a cloud and the companionable moonbeam vanished.

From time to time an occasional star would wink down at him and once he heard the strange cry of a hunting owl, but the moon passed invisibly overhead and he saw her no more that night.

By the time the dawn had begun to break over the far hills, the Snowman's fear had changed almost into curiosity. Suddenly he felt very glad that he had been born facing towards the East and was aware of a strange glow somewhere inside him as he watched the stars silently wink out and the pale clouds burn fiery red under the first fingering of the hidden sun. What would this melting be like, he wondered. True, the moonbeam had passed it over with a laugh, but then the moonbeam was not made of snow. And she had said that all earth-things died. Did that mean that all these trees would melt too? Somehow he found it hard to believe as he stared with all the power of his black pebble eyes towards the far horizon.

So engrossed was he that he did not see the wind come dancing gaily across the snow and was most surprised when a voice whispered in his ear: 'What! Not melted yet, old Snowman?'

'Oh, it's *you*, is it?' he grunted, recognising the voice and if he

had been able he would have turned away in disgust. As it was he continued to stare stonily ahead.

'My, my. And what's come over you, all of a sudden?' asked the wind. 'I suppose you've been having a chat with one of those know-all moonbeams.' But the Snowman made no reply.

'And was she telling you she's as old as Time itself?' the wind chattered on. 'Well, don't you believe it. There were winds blowing before the moon was ever thought of, and that's a fact, if you want one. Next time you see her you can pass that on with my compliments.'

'I thought you said I would be melted as soon as the sun came,' said the Snowman sulkily. 'How can I pass it on if I'm not here?'

'Did I say that?' asked the wind with feigned astonishment. 'Well, I must have been in a terrible hurry that's all. The trouble is, I'm so busy nowadays that I've hardly a minute to talk to anyone. Of course you'll see her again. Why, I've known Snowmen who have taken *weeks* to melt and there's no reason why you shouldn't do the same. You look as strong as a house to me,' and he gave the Snowman a playful push that nearly tumbled the rickety old hat from his head.

That was quite the best news the Snowman had ever heard. Not that he knew how long weeks might be but judging by the tone the wind had used he guessed it was quite a good while.

'Tell me, old wind,' he said, 'are there any more Snowmen about here, or am I the only one?'

The wind appeared to reflect for a moment. 'As far as I know,' it said, 'and I may say that I know most things that are going on in this world—you're the only snowman for miles. Quite an honour, if you only realized it,' and giving the Snowman another playful shove it danced away over the hills.

'He doesn't seem such a bad fellow, after all,' said the Snowman to himself. 'But I do wish he wouldn't be so boisterous. Another of his little pushes and I'd have been as good as melted,' and he shuddered involuntarily at the unpleasant thought.

By this time the sun was already beginning to show itself. As it climbed slowly above the hills, pushing back the wispy clouds

like hair from its face, the Snowman felt the first gentle warmth of the early beams.

‘Really, this is quite pleasant,’ he thought, and listening to the singing of the birds in the trees, he laughed at himself for having been afraid. Then he heard the wind returning.

As it rushed past him it shouted: ‘Hi, there, old Snowman. You’ll soon be feeling at home again. I’m just off to collect a snowstorm. But beware of—’ and the words were whisked away before the Snowman could hear what he was supposed to beware of. Nevertheless he felt strangely happy, though he could not for the life of him have said why. What a snowstorm was he had no idea, but somehow he felt instinctively that he would enjoy it.

Then he noticed that the heat from the sun was gradually diminishing and that the shadows were less easy to define upon the snow. Slowly the hills seemed to creep further and further into the distance until at last he lost sight of them altogether. And with the hills, vanished the sun. How cold and desolate the countryside looked when it had gone. The land seemed to lose all hope and to stand dejectedly waiting for the inevitable snow.

Then the storm began. Driving snowflakes swept up the valleys and over the hilltops; curling themselves into strange aerial shapes; pausing and fluttering with infinite delicacy to the waiting earth. But whether spinning wildly in their mad dances or drifting in great leisurely clouds, they were all familiar to the Snowman. And as he watched he became aware of a strange apprehension; a sense of expectation, but no longer being a cloud of snow himself he could not recall what it was he awaited.

Then, above the soft flurry of snowflakes he heard a sound. High it was and clear as the chiming of glass bells, indescribably sweet and fine. And hearing it the Snowman trembled as he stood and let the soft snowflakes close his eyes for he was mightily afraid.

Louder grew the wild music until it seemed to be hovering in the air directly above his head, and as if at some unheard command the concealing snowflakes fell from his eyes and before him he beheld the Spirit of the Snow.

Unutterably fair was her face but paler than the plumage of the swan. Red were her lips as ruby asphodels. And her eyes were as green as the green ice and her hair gleamed palely gold amid her mantle of swirling snowflakes. Stepping with airy grace from her icy carriage drawn by two great snow-geese, she stood in all her wild beauty before the awed Snowman. Her eyes glittered like cold emerald flames and she beckoned him towards her. Under her magic spell, the Snowman felt his hampering snow-limbs change, and he walked towards her and knelt with bowed head, awaiting her command.

Then like a tempest the wild music had swelled about them. Raising his bowed head the wondering Snowman saw the Spirit of the Snow holding out her arms towards him. As he stretched forth his own to meet them he seemed to hear from infinitely far away, the faintest echo of the wind's last words: 'Beware—.' But drawn onwards irresistibly by the smiling lips and eyes of the waiting Spirit he paid no heed to the echo and taking her white hands in his, swung into a mad waltz amid the curtains of shifting snow.

Hither and thither they whirled, never tiring, light as the snowflakes themselves, while the Snow Spirit's long golden hair wrapped about them in a glittering web of light and the music rose and fell in a magic fountain of sound.

But in the very middle of a furious pirouette the music suddenly ceased. Scarcely knowing what he did, the Snowman slowly released her hands and taking the Spirit of the Snow into his arms, pressed his chilly mouth upon her. Immediately a deathly stillness fell upon the land. Even the falling snow was halted in its descent. The Snowman's arms fell back against his sides and he felt himself being slowly drawn backwards over the snow until he stood in his old accustomed spot. 'What have I done?' he cried in anguish. 'Why must I return now?' But the Spirit of the Snow made no reply as she climbed back into her icy carriage and lifted the frosty reins.

'Come back to me! Oh, come back!' he cried again, and slowly she turned her beautiful face towards him. 'Yes,' she murmured softly, 'I will come back,' and a laugh as cold as the ice she loved fluttered from her lips.

Then she gave a swift flick at the reins and the snow-geese spread their great wings and bore her out of sight.

As she departed the snow fell more slowly until at last only a few stray flakes were left fluttering down from the grey skies. The Snowman stared on into the distance as before but now his eyes saw only the face of the Snow Spirit and his ears rang loud with the echoes of the magic music.

In the evening the wind came bustling back noisily across the white fields. 'How did you enjoy the storm, old Snowman?' he boomed, but the Snowman was still dazed by the memory and only murmured, 'Hello.'

'What?' cried the wind. 'Was it as disappointing as all that?' He swept round and peered into the Snowman's pebble eyes. 'I *guessed* as much,' he said. 'You've been dancing with the Spirit of the Snow. They all do, the fools. Still, as long as you took my warning and didn't kiss her, you'll be all right, so cheer up.'

But the Snowman was not listening to his chatter. 'Is she really as lovely as that?' he asked, as though he still could scarcely believe what he had seen.

'Eh, wassat?' said the wind. 'Lovely as what? Come on, come on. When you've seen as many beautiful women as I have, you won't lose your heart so quickly.' Then a sudden thought seemed to strike him and for a moment his bluff manner changed. 'You *didn't* kiss her, did you?' he asked, and there was real concern in his voice.

'Why, yes, of course,' said the Snowman, roused from his trance by the new tone of the wind. 'There was nothing wrong with that, was there?'

'No, no, of course not,' said the wind hastily, but his voice was mournful as he said goodnight and moved sadly about his business.

The Snowman had no time to waste in thinking about the wind and before his friend was over the hill he was again spinning wildly in his dream-dance with the beautiful Spirit.

That night there was no moon, but the Snowman did not miss the company of the moonbeam. Every moment he expected to hear the creaking wings of the snow-geese and to see the swift snowflakes floating about the wonderful ice carriage. But the

long night passed and brought him neither sight nor sound of the things he most desired.

Next morning when the wind came past again, the Snowman called out to him: 'What about another snowstorm then, you lazy old good-for-nothing?'

'My, my,' teased the wind, 'you must be in bad state,' and he made as if to pass on his way. The Snowman called him back: 'Please blow up another storm, old friend,' he cajoled. 'Why it wouldn't take you any time. Just this once.'

Hearing his imploring tone, the wind became suddenly serious. 'Do you know what you're asking for?' he inquired.

'Why, of course I do,' said the Snowman. 'I wouldn't ask if I didn't.'

'That's all right then,' said the wind. 'As long as you don't mind having your heart broken, I'm sure I don't mind doing it for you.'

'What on earth are you talking about?' said the incredulous Snowman. 'Who ever mentioned broken hearts? I'm sure I never did.'

'Look here,' said the wind indulgently, as though he were speaking to a small child, 'just tell me what happened to you in that snowstorm yesterday.'

Wonderingly the Snowman told him of everything that had taken place from the moment he had first heard the approaching Spirit of the Snow, to the moment the snow-geese had drawn the carriage out of his sight.

The wind listened thoughtfully: 'And she said she'd come back, did she?' he asked, when the Snowman had finished.

'Oh, yes,' cried the Snowman, then added a trifle doubtfully, 'but she *did* laugh a little.'

'Of course you've fallen in love with her?' said the wind, and for the first time the Snowman was overcome with shyness and could not answer.

'Hmph! I thought as much,' said the wind and he laughed bitterly.

'You *will* bring a storm, won't you?' the Snowman asked anxiously.

'Why should I?' growled the wind, more to himself than the

Snowman. 'Day after day, year after year, I watch her breaking their hearts, until I almost wonder if I've got one left myself. No, I *won't* bring you a storm. I'll cheat her this time, you see if I don't.'

'No no, not that,' cried the Snowman, piteously, 'I couldn't bear not to see her again. She won't hurt me, I'm sure she won't, and—oh wind; *that dance*. . . .'

Seeing how miserable he was the wind felt terribly sorry for him, but he just did not know what to do.

'Anyway,' the Snowman reasoned, 'it'll break my heart if she *doesn't* come, that I *do* know,' and he started to cry softly to himself.

What could the wind do? Only too well he knew what would happen if the Spirit of the Snow returned, but then again the Snowman could hardly be more unhappy than he was already. 'There, there, old chap,' he said soothingly, 'don't carry on like this or you'll melt yourself away and that would never do.'

'You *will* fetch a storm then? You'll bring her back to me?' asked the Snowman between huge sniffs.

'Yes, yes, old chap. I'll bring her back, don't you worry,' said the wind, but he knew what he had said and hated himself for it.

'Thank you, thank you, old friend,' the Snowman cried, his tears already forgotten. 'And will you bring her soon?'

'Soon enough,' said the wind, but his heart was as heavy as lead within him and he cursed the Spirit of the Snow for the witch she was.

Of course the Snowman did not believe the wind—who can believe evil of the one they love?—and he said goodbye with repeated requests for his friend to hurry.

The wind, for his part, was anything but eager for the task and, had it not been for his promise, he would never have thought of bringing another storm. But a promise is a promise and he saw nothing for it but to set out. However, he made sure he took his time and that, as you shall hear, was perhaps his worst mistake.

At the bottom of the hill on which the Snowman stood, was a cottage in which lived a farm labourer with his wife and their young son. In the mornings, when his father was working in the fields, the boy was given the task of taking him his dinner. To

make it easier for him to carry the bundle of food, the boy's mother had made him a satchel which he carried slung over his shoulder. This left both his hands free to do whatever they wished and as often as not they wished to fire a catapult.

On this very day the farm labourer happened to be working in a field directly behind the hill, and to save himself the trouble of walking all the way round by the snowy road, the boy decided to take a short cut over the top. Unfortunately the short cut took him right across the field where the Snowman had been built and seeing him standing there the boy went across to have a look at him.

For a long while the two stared at each other and then just when the boy was turning away some mischievous spirit frightened a rabbit from practically under his feet. As quick as thought the catapult was in the boy's hand and one of the Snowman's eyes was flying after the scuttling rabbit. In less time than it takes to tell the other had followed it. There the Snowman stood; still with the old hat perched upon his head; still facing towards the East, but as blind as a bat in the bright sunshine. Ignorant of what he had done, the boy went whistling on his way, already thinking about other things.

Now although the Snowman had not come alive until he received his eyes, he did not die when they were taken away. Perhaps it would have been better if he had, but unfortunately things rarely happen in the best way and so he still stood there, able to hear and unable to see.

But although the Snowman was utterly astonished by what had happened, he was not as concerned as he might otherwise have been. 'It will only be a short while before the Spirit of the Snow returns,' he told himself, 'and it will be the work of a moment for her to find me some new eyes.' And he started to listen as hard as ever he could for the approach of the storm.

The wind, knowing nothing of the Snowman's plight, dawdled about his task of collecting a storm. 'At least he will have a few hours of happiness before his heart is broken,' he said, and for once he did not grumble when the clouds evaded his grasp. But at last he could put it off no longer, and giving the heavy cloud-bundles a push he sent them rolling across the sky

to the hill where the Snowman waited impatiently for their coming.

In spite of his hard listening, the first the Snowman knew of the storm was when a large snowflake settled in one of his empty eye sockets. The reason why he had heard nothing was that the wind, who usually enjoyed making a noise and chivvying the clouds about the sky, had not put his heart into his morning's work and, apart from a push to start it on its journey, had left the storm alone.

A second flake joined the first, then a third and a fourth and soon the sky was filled with the gentle feathers of snow, drifting softly down. And sure enough with the thickening snow came the distant sound of bells, high up as before and gradually growing louder and stronger and more wonderful as they neared the earth.

With a bursting heart the Snowman heard the sudden creak and rustle of great wings and he guessed that the icy carriage had alighted.

As before he felt the congealed snowflakes drop from his eyes, but now he had to rely on memory to tell him what stood before him. Gradually he felt the weight leave his limbs and he stepped uncertainly forward into the darkness. 'Beautiful lady,' he cried, sinking to his knees on the soft carpet of snow, 'beautiful lady, give me eyes that I may see your loveliness once again and dance with you as I danced before,' and impulsively he stretched out his hands towards the place where he imagined she stood.

Then, like a sharp knife in his heart, he heard the tinkling laugh from close beside him. 'Why,' sang the voice, beautiful in surprise, 'the old Snowman's blind,' and magical voices in the very air itself echoed her words until it seemed to the unhappy Snowman that the whole world was gaily chanting: 'The old Snowman's blind. The old Snowman's blind, blind, blind . . .' over and over again.

Yet even then he could not believe that what he heard was true. 'It must be the wind playing some trick,' he thought and turned to where the voice had come from. 'Lovely creature, do but put your hand in mine and I will dance as though my eyes

were of diamonds and could see into the very heart of each snowflake.' But the only answer was the same cruel, merry laugh that now seemed to come from the very point he had first addressed. 'Oh! why do you torment me?' he cried in agony. 'Surely the wind cannot have been right. No, I will never believe it. You are not cruel.' He rose from his knees and began feeling his way towards the carriage, only to hear the laugh from directly behind him. Hearing it he grew frantic, for he was terrified of believing that what he heard was the truth. 'Eyes,' he choked, 'give me eyes that I may see to hold you once more in my arms.'

'How can I give you eyes?' came the laughing answer and the cruel echoes chanted, *give you eyes; give you eyes*. 'Ask your friend the wind to give you eyes, he could do it better than I.' *Better than I; better than I*, laughed the echoes.

Running frenziedly towards the voice he stumbled against the carriage and lay panting with his cold cheek pressed to its glassy side. 'If I stay here,' he thought, 'I will be bound to find her, for she cannot fly away without her carriage.' And there he waited while the cold snow fluttered down softly upon his bowed head.

Poor Snowman! Had he but heeded the words of the wind he might have been spared his pain. But love is deaf as well as blind and the Snowman was caught terribly in its toils.

Hearing a sound above him he reached suddenly up and caught a strand of golden hair between his fingers. But suddenly terrified lest he should hurt the thing he loved more than his own life he let it slip from his grasp. He need not have bothered. All he got for his pains was a stinging cut from an ice-whip and, as the snow-geese rose into the air with the carriage, he fell forward insensible, his blind face buried in the snow. Thus he was spared the pain of hearing that last beautiful laugh, dying away like a distant chime, high in the air above him.

Late that night the wind found him and using his own magic powers carried the Snowman back to his old body. But the wind could do nothing about the missing eyes and left him, to return once more with the dawn.

Nor did the wind question him about what had taken

place—he knew too well from experience—but he wondered about the Snowman's blindness for never before had he known the Snow Spirit to be as cruel as that. Gradually the Snowman found his tongue but he said little and seemed pathetically grateful that the wind should bother to stay and talk with him. With the wisdom of all his thousands of years the wind knew the best thing to do, and day after day he kept the sky swept clear of clouds and let the sun work its will upon the old blind Snowman.

At last, after days of patient labour, all that was left of the Snowman was the old battered hat and an icicle shaped like a heart. And the icicle was cracked right across.



The Magic Spectacles
and Other Tales
by
Richard Cowper

