A Fairy

Outside the window it was a spring evening. All was shrouded in haze and a vague moon was floating in it. Among the leaves of some flowering plant a white butterfly was sleeping its peaceful sleep.

Inside the room K——, a girl of nineteen, was seated in a chair, alone and looking wistful. But it was no nameless longing peculiar to the season of spring that was troubling her thoughts. It was a definite problem.

"Can't anything be done with that girl so I can get the better of her?"

She said this in a whisper. By 'that girl' she meant I—— who was of the same age. K—— and I—— were friends in their school days and after their graduation from school, both of them set their hearts on entering the theatrical world. Even now they seemed to be intimate friends to the outsiders.

But this was just an outward appearance. They were rivals neither of whom could even for a moment take her mind off the other.

Of course, K—— did fairly well at school, was good-looking and had a talent for dramatic performance. Yet, she couldn't help feeling that she was inferior, though slightly, to I—— by comparison. She wished to beat I—— by hook or by crook, which was her obsession now. Especially on an evening like this, the thoughts of her rival filled her mind.

"Isn't there any good means, I wonder?"

When she whispered thus to herself again, she heard a voice uttered from nowhere.
“Yes, there is.”

It was a high-pitched but sweet voice. She looked around and finding out who uttered it, could hardly believe her eyes. She saw a little girl in a sky blue dress sitting on the window-sill, who looked as if she just stole out of the haze. At a glance K— realized that the little girl was no ordinary kind of child. In the first place she was very small, like a French doll, with transparent wings on her back.

She abruptly ventured a question.

“Who may you be?”

“I am a fairy.”

“Can there be such a being as a fairy?”

Another good look and K— found the little girl had a lovely face. Yet, it seemed that somehow she had feelings unlike those of a human being.

“You see one here before your own eyes, don’t you?”

“Yes, indeed. What are you here for, then?”

“You seem to be in some trouble. I thought I’d help you out of it.”

“Can you do all sorts of things?”

“Yes, anything and everything. Tell me whatever you wish. I’ll grant all you ask.”

K— thought for a while and then said.

“I’d like to have a handsome boy-friend. How about it?”

Gently moving her wings, the fairy gave her a ready consent.

“All right. I’ll send one to you in a few days. This young man will accost you on the street, while you are walking along it. He is gentle, graceful, serious-minded and rich.”

It rejoiced K—— to hear these words. She was happy to make the acquaintance of such a young man. Not that alone but she’d be able to show it off to I—— now at last. I— had no boy-friend yet. So she said, pretending as if she had little or no concern.

“Thank you. If this happens to me, I—— will surely be chagrined at it, though.”

But the fairy shook her head and said.
“That’s only what you think.”
“What is it that you really mean, then?”
“Well, you seem not to know the condition on which a fairy grants people their wishes. I thought you had learned it from some fairytale. A fairy can help you realize what you wish but you must know that double what you get will be given to your rival at the same time.
“What will happen in I—’s case, then?”
“She’ll be able to get two smart boy-friends.”
It somehow dampened K—’s eagerness now to picture the two young men trying to fawn upon I—.
“Then I’ll withdraw this wish of mine. I’d like to ask you for something else,”
“That’s all right. I’ll grant you anything you wish for. If you want a jewel, I’ll help you obtain one.”
“Really? A jewel is the very thing for me. I’ve long been wanting a rubie ring.”
The fairy nodded, listening to her but answered with a wry smile.
“By way of warning, I must tell you a ring set with twice as large a rubie will go to I—.”
K— again lost her eagerness, for she didn’t feel like having a ring so much any more, if she couldn’t sport it to I—.
“I want a jewel no more.”
“What else do you want, now?”
“I daresay a fairy is a mean thing.”
“You think so? I wonder which race is more wicked by nature, fairies or humans? We fairies say we are always quite ready for any service required, but it is your race that turns down our offer.”
“Wait a moment. Let me think well.”
K— was absorbed in trying to think up some other wishes she’d like to be granted, but it was very hard for her to hit upon anything appropriate. She wanted a dress. She wanted a pair of shoes. And there were many others she wanted. But when she thought that I— would be given twice as much or many as she could get, she could never put
these things into words. She had long been wanting an important part
to be cast to her in next public performance of a play, but if realized,
this would make possible the assignment of a still more important part
to I——.

The fairy who saw all this said.
"You seem to be in a pretty mess. If you'd like to triumph over I——so
badly, you might as well ask me something that will make it possible.
I'm ready to grant it."
"What kind of ................ ?"
"I'll tell you what. Ask me to make you look ugly and I——will then
be made to look still uglier than you. If you get a hurt in one hand, she
will in both hands."

But K—— couldn't on any account bring herself to let fall this kind
of request as her wish to be granted. She was not so silly as that.
"I've got a good idea at last. I understand you'll grant me any wish
of mine."

She suddenly sparkled her eyes and said in a raised voice. The fairy
nodded.
"That's right."
"Then possess I——by your magical power. You can do it, can't you?"
At this the fairy showed little surprise.
"You seem to be no different from others. Everybody hits upon the
same idea."
"You mean you can't do it?"
"Yes, I can. But remember that you'll never be able to see me again,
once I'm gone.
"I won't mind it."

Thereupon the fairy had hardly moved her wings before she vanish-
ed into the night. Never again did she make an appearance. K——kept
awaiting news from the fairy but no such good luck as she expected
came her way.

It was only after a long time that she could manage to find out the
reason for it.
K— thought I—a rival to her but I— didn't look upon K—as her rival.

K deeply regretted having allowed the fairy to fly away, leaving her. She now tried to resign herself to it by cherishing it as a mere dream she dreamt on a spring night.

Yet, from time to time, she wished in spite of herself that the fairy would possess somebody who regarded her as a rival and that good luck might thus be brought to her, though she knew she was expecting too much.

Passing Ahead

A highway stretched flat and smooth, shone upon by the sun. The car driven by the man slid along the highway toward a suburb. The new car was in perfect gear in every way. This man was now on his way to the apartment of a girl with whom his love affair had just begun.

"A car isn't a car, unless it is a car of the latest model. Not cars alone, for that matter. So with girls. I trade in an old one for a new one in turn. This is my principle."

Mumbling thus, he speeded up his car. The wind, streaming in through the window left slightly open, blew against his face typical of a Don Juan. The continuous light vibration of the car casually reminded him of the outmoded car he had disposed of some time before. And at the same time the association it recalled to his mind shifted to a girl from whom he had recently parted for good.

When he proposed severance, the girl who he had been told was a sitter said with a drawn face and in an entreaty voice.

"You are fed up with me, aren't you? I'm almost sure of it."

"Well, but that's not exactly what I mean."

His answer was ambiguous but the girl became more serious.

"Dear, I won't part from you. You are not going to cast me off."

"But I think it meaningless now for you and me to continue association further."
"I'll kill myself' if I can see you no more."

The same old pet line. Women always used it, whenever severance was proposed, but if such a trick did any good, no man would be able to break off with women. Disposing of the affair in a manner so off-hand, he began to have a crush on another girl.

And never did he dream then that the girl should die by her own hand. But the fact was that she committed suicide some time afterward. He felt sick, whenever he was reminded of it. Of course, no man would feel good at the death of a girl who had once been dear to his heart. But in his case there was something that depressed him more. It was an additional remark she dropped at parting.

"I mean to meet you somewhere even after my death. I'm sure I will. Please take hold of my hand at least, then."

When she said so, what on earth would she have meant? He could never forget these words and whenever he recalled them to his mind, he was seized with some uncanny feeling.

"That's out of spite anyway. An idea that came up incidentally and was blurted out. Take it easy."

Mumbling thus, he speeded up his car again, as though trying to dispel the depressing gloom. And he approached the car running just ahead.

But he suddenly quit his pursuit of the car, for he found that the girl at the back seat of it looked from behind just like that girl he had abandoned. He looked hard for a while and soon shook his head firmly.

"It's the work of my imagination. I'm not quite myself today. I'm sure she is dead and gone. It's only because I am in a mood like this that the girl I happen to see looks like that girl. I must get rid of such a mood. All I have to do now is just to pass the car ahead so as to have a glimpse of the girl's face."

He again speeded his car up and darted his glance at the face of the girl, as he passed ahead.

"Oh, dear!"

He uttered a scream with fright. No doubt she was that girl he had
deserted. And what was more, he saw her hand extended toward him.

"Take hold of my hand."

It seemed as if she were calling to him. He instinctively covered his face with both hands.

"It's an instantaneous death, isn't it? But whatever is the cause of this accident, I wonder? Didn't you notice anything in particular, when you witnessed the scene?"

Writing down something in his pocket notebook, the traffic cop asked the driver of the car which had been passed ahead.

"The whole thing beats me. He overtook my car and driving on some short distance, smashed his car against the electric-light pole. I bet he must have gone off his nut suddenly."

"Oh, really?"

Closing his notebook, the cop casually turned his eyes to the interior of the car and said.

"By the way the lady at the back seat looks somewhat funny, doesn't she?"

"She may, yes, but that's a mannequin. I'm a maker of mannequins. I'm now on the way out to deliver it to its orderer."

"Quite well-made, eh?"

"Yes, but when it was made, the sitter who posed for it was a superb girl. It's a pity that she committed suicide some time ago, forsaken by a faithless man.

Homecoming

The man was born in a mountain village.

When he was fifteen, his father died. Before this happened, his mother had met an accidental death by a fall from a precipice.
Besides, he was an only child. This meant that he was left an utter orphan. An orphan in a mountain village might possibly produce an impression that he is to be pitied, living in needy circumstances. But such was not the case with this man.

He was beset with no immediate privation. Far from it, he was an heir to a big fortune. He owned a large forest. He could feel quite secure about his livelihood merely by having trees cut down for sale and seedlings planted in their stead.

What was more, costly heirlooms handed down successively from his ancestors were stored in the repository on the spacious grounds. Objets d'art, noted swords, old oval gold coins and many such other things,—these were so many and varied that it might have taken days to inspect and count them all.

At the age of fifteen, he, a mere boy, was still too young to start taking charge of them. The responsibility devolved upon the village headman who was his guardian. And the matter was considered safe in the hands of this trustworthy man of character. As for cooking and housecleaning, the neighbors came and offered their service, lured by money.

His was a life, easy and carefree.

But he soon began to have an inkling of something strange. Something out of the ordinary, though unnameable for sure.

For instance, people turned upon him a strange look, a look of discrimination. Since he lived in comfort, their envy was inevitable, but he somehow sensed it otherwise.

What could it all be about? There seemed to be some gossip about him among the villagers. His sudden and unexpected appearance upset them and made them incoherent in their talk.

There was something akin to pity in their eyes, too. It was presumable that he, who was parentless and utterly alone, might arouse their compassion. This, however, didn't seem to be the sole cause for it. A phenomenon beyond comprehension. There must be some other cause. He was dying to find it out.
The truth could not lie hidden for ever. Besides, he was now going all out to discover the secret somehow or other.

And one day it at last came to his knowledge. He eavesdropped on the villagers without being seen. A shocking revelation. It was only natural that no one of them was willing to let him know the truth. In such a case ignorance might have been better, but it was too late.

His life-span had been pre-determined to be exactly forty. It was his fate from which there was no escape.

To make sure of it, he called on the village headman.

"Is it true that I can't live longer than forty?"

"I thought I'd like to keep it secret from you as long as possible, but the way things are going, I can't help it now. Yes, it is true. Through the successive generations the head of your family died exactly at forty. Look into your family record and you'll find no exception."

"My father died at forty, didn't he? In what state of mind do you think he lived?"

"I'd rather think he resigned himself to his fate, attaining to a sort of 'satori' or some sort of religious awakening. You know, he died a peaceful death."

"But what on earth brought all this about, I wonder? Is it due to some kind of retribution or curse?"

"Not without some such rumor. But so far as I have ascertained, this is how it came about. Maybe it was in the age of civil wars. Your ancestor offered a prayer to the mountain god that not only he but all his descendants might live to be forty. And his prayer was granted."

"What made him pray for our life-span to be forty, I wonder?"

"As I said, it was in the age of civil wars. Many people died young, forcibly dragged into battles or attacked by bandits. Things were no better in the Edo period that followed. Famines were of no rare occurrence. Adequate medicine was the last thing that could be hoped for. Half the new-born babies died within a year of their birth. If you suppurated, if you suffered from appendicitis or if an epidemic was rampant, you were sure to meet an untimely death."
"People were short-lived in those days?"

"That's why it was a great blessing to have a life-span of forty guaranteed. And as a matter of fact, none of your ancestors were younger than forty, when they died. This enabled them to amass a large fortune, too. The village folks are said to have envied your ancestors on account of the capital protection they were provided with by the mountain god."

"But in the present age when............ ?"

"Well, all I can say is that I feel sorry for you. But before you are forty, you'll never die of illness. Nor is it likely that you'll meet with a fatal accident."

The village headman consoled him thus, to which he shook his head.

"Your kind words do not raise my spirits. Ah, what a misfortune! Science ought to do something for me."

"Your deceased father said something like it and used to go to hospital for treatment. But all was in vain. Scientifically speaking, there might be some determinant of life-span in the genes of your family. You know, some flowers are in bloom for a long time but others fall in a few days."

"Maybe I'm hoping against hope, then?"

"The best thing for you to do now is to do whatever you like and find contentment in your life. You are rich, for that matter. I'll send you as much money as you want, if you write me for it."

"I will."

And he left the village to lead a life which would please his fancy. Doomed as he was, he could enjoy life in his twenties. Forty, for one thing, was still far, far away. And there were around him many people who were more unfortunate than he and as many were those who died younger, too. Better still, he could dare to lead an intemperate life without a fear of death. Armed with no end of money, his was a dissipated life from day to day. He had no need to find a job, either, for even if he could secure a good position, it would avail him nothing, to begin with.
In his thirties, however, misgivings gradually began to mount. Only less than ten years were allowed him now. A loose life more and more given to drinking and womanizing. Yet, he could in no way take pleasure out of it.

He sometimes thought to turn over a new leaf by practising asceticism, which he found did not suit him. Back again to his old dissolute life. Only five years more left. In desperation he resolved on a still more licentious course of life.

He went home and called on the village headman.

"Dispose of all my property, please. If I may get married and have a child of my own, nothing but trouble will ever come to him. I'd like to do whatever strikes my fancy and put an end to my family line."

"I won't stop you from it."

The village headman acceded to his request and after busying himself about it awhile, was kind enough to sell off all that property for cash, including the large forest. The man gave the village headman some amount of money in reward for it and left the village again.

A trip abroad. Gambling. Doping in the last resort. His uneasy mind had to be diverted somehow or other, though none of these were of much avail. Anyway he enjoyed fast living of all sorts and a huge amount of money in his possession was squandered in no time.

Thirty-eight. He incurred a lot of debts all around. He made loan after loan from every acquaintance. He knew he wouldn't be able to pay it back. Two years more and he would be doomed. When he could no longer borrow, he even resorted to con games. And the money thus obtained was gone in dissipation just the same way as before.

A hot pursuit after him began by his creditors and victims. In an attempt to run away from them, he joined a criminal organization and ventured a suggestion.

"I'll undertake to be a killer, if you wish."

"We've got a likely fellow, haven't we?" said the gangsters.

The man got a tolerably good position in this criminal organization, for the task of killing was no jesting matter, yet he was willing to
accept it.

As a matter of fact, he took upon himself this task of killing and killed three members of the opposing gang. He had only to aim his rifle at each of them and push the trigger.

But Father Time is unfeeling. His fortieth birthday was gradually approaching. He was wanted by the police and was also shadowed by members of the opposing gang. The criminal organization with which he was affiliated treated him now as a nuisance, gave him some money and packed him off.

Indulgence in drinking and doping as ever. At this stage he was an addict through and through. Part of his brains, however, still retained some sanity and with this slight self-awareness that remained, he started for home. Now, with no alternative to take, it was his last wish to die in his birthplace and nag as much as possible at his ancestors in the next world.

The village headman was still in good health, though retired from his post.

"You seem to have been fairly on the loose."

"Just a matter of course. Mine has been a wretched life after all. Now I have only a few days left to live."

"You just wait! I remember your mother’s written will left behind. I wonder when she set it down. I thought I’d like to send it to you, but I couldn’t, as no one of us knew your address."

"What does it matter to me now?"

But the man received the note all the same, broke the seal and read it.

"A chill came over me when I came to know the fate that dogged this family from generation to generation. As a result, I betrayed your father in secret, though I knew I was behaving wrongly. The man I chose was of a family blessed with longevity. It was you who thus arrived. A breach of faith between husband and wife may be unpardonable. But when I thought of a child to come, I couldn’t do otherwise. The family I come from is also one in which longevity runs in the blood. So,
you will have no need to worry about your life-span. You will be glad of this and I am sure you will be grateful to me for it.