

THE GIANT KILLER

OR THE BATTLE WHICH ALL MUST FIGHT

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THE GIANT KILLER

OR THE BATTLE WHICH WE ALL MUST FIGHT

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The Readings

CHAPTER 1

THE ARRIVAL

Well, I hope that we're near the end of our journey at last!" exclaimed Adolphus Probyn, with a long weary yawn, as the Fly which was conveying him and his brother from the station rolled slowly along a quiet country road.

"You're in a precious hurry to get there," said Constantine, fixing his thumbs in his waistcoat pockets, and putting up his feet on the opposite seat; "but I don't believe that you'll like the place when you see it. I hate being sent to a private tutor's; I'd rather have gone to a regular school at once."

"I don't know as that," said Adolphus, who had some vague ideas in his mind about fagging, hard dumplings, and wooden benches.

"One thing I know," cried his brother, "I'm certain to dislike this tutor with all my heart."

Adolphus did not take the trouble to ask his reasons, but Constantine went on without stopping to be questioned.

"I should dislike any one recommended by Aunt Law-

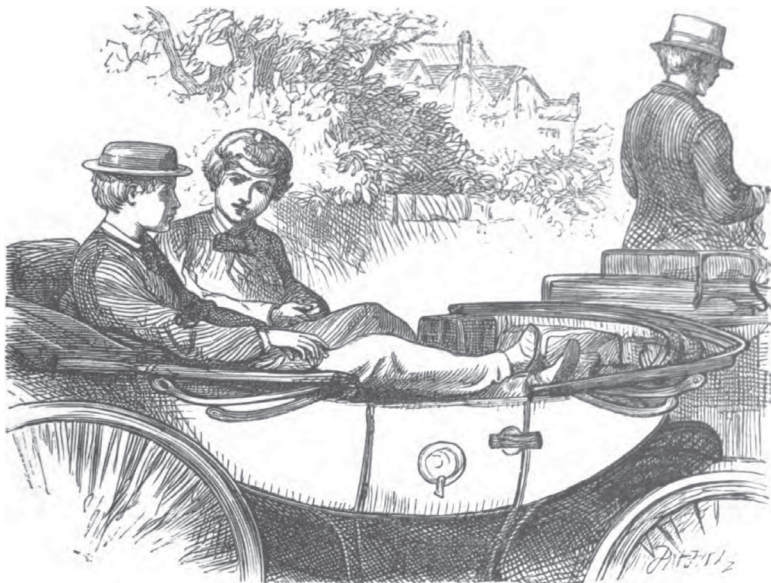
rence, she's so particular, thinks so many things wrong, is so fond of good books and lectures, and that sort of thing. Depend upon it, she put into papa's head that we were spoilt, and needed someone to keep us in order, and she found out this poor country clergyman"—

"Poor—I'm sorry he's poor," observed Adolphus; "he'll not make us half so comfortable as we were at home. I wonder if he'll have no late second dinner."

"Oh, you may make up your mind to that!" cried his brother; "all the family will dine together at One on boiled mutton and rice pudding, or bacon and beans!"

Adolphus sighed. "And it will be work, work, work, from morning till night, with no change but long sermons, long lectures, and long walks; and if we go bird nesting, or have a little fun, won't we catch it,—that's all!"

"Here we are at last!" said Adolphus, as the fly stopped at a little green door.



The Finish of the Journey

Constantine put his head out the window. "No carriage drive," he muttered; "what a mean place it must be!"

Scarcely had the coachman's pull at the bell broken the peaceful stillness of that quiet spot, when the green door was thrown wide open, and a boy of about eleven years of age appeared at it, with a broad smile of welcome on his face.

"I'm so glad you've come—we've been waiting dinner for you; let me help down with that," he added, as the coachman made preparations for lifting down a black trunk which had kept him company on the box.

Constantine jumped from the carriage; his twin brother more slowly descended, and without troubling themselves with their luggage, or taking much notice of their new companion, they proceeded along the narrow gravel-walk which led up to the entrance of the dwelling.

A pretty cottage it appeared, though a small one, with the sunshine gleaming through the twining roses on the diamond-panelled windows, that peeped from beneath the low thatched roof. It would have looked very well in a picture; not a chimney but was twisted into some elegant shape; the whole building, nestling in trees and garlanded with creepers, might have served as a model to a painter. But as Adolphus gazed curiously upon his new home, it looked to his eye rather too much like a magnified toy: he began to wonder to himself where room could be found in it for him and his brother, especially when he saw two little girls standing in the porch watching their arrival with a look of shy pleasure.

Boys of ten years of age are, however, seldom long troubled with thoughts such as these, and the attention of young Probyn was almost immediately diverted by the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Roby, who advanced to welcome their guests to Dove's Nest. The former was a tall, pale gentleman, with



The Reception

a stoop, a high forehead and thoughtful air, which at once impressed the two little boys with an idea that a very learned scholar was before them. Mrs. Roby, on the contrary, was stout and rather short, with a bright merry glance in her dark eyes, to which the dimples in her cheeks corresponded; there was kindness in the press of her hand, and a cheerful animation about her whole manner that made her guests feel at home with her at once.

"I see that my Aleck has introduced himself to you already," said she, smiling, "but here are other little friends glad to see you, and anxious, I am sure, to make you happy. Bertha—Laura—my darling," she continued, laying her hand fondly on the curly head of the youngest child, the little image of herself, with her bright eyes and merry glance, "you should bid these young gentlemen welcome."

The Probyns were soon shown to the room which they

were to share with Aleck; and though the ceiling was low, and sloped down on one side, and the single window was certainly small, he would have been difficult to please indeed, who could have found fault with so pretty an apartment. Everything was so beautifully clean and neat, and through that open window came so sweet an air; while the tinkle of a distant sheep-bell, and the carol of birds from the neighbouring trees, made music delightful after the rattle of a railway, or the ceaseless roll of carriages in London.

The dinner, also, to which the Probyns speedily descended, was excellent, though simple; and Adolphus especially, who had soon managed to find out that no second one was to be expected, did ample justice to the good cheer after his long journey, having quite forgotten sundry parcels of sandwiches and cake which he had managed to dispose of by the way. Being rather shy at first, and under the eye of Mr. Roby, the boys were upon their good behaviour, and everything went on very harmoniously. Laura had indeed to squeeze up very close to her mother to avoid the elbows of Constantine, and opened her merry eyes wider than usual when Adolphus, seeing that the plum tart was rapidly disappearing, thrust forward his plate for a second help before he had half finished his first. But no open notice was taken of either breach of good manners; this was not the time to find fault. Mr. Roby sat quiet and observant, and his two little daughters said little; but their mother led the conversation, in which Aleck joined freely, and before the dinner was over the Probyns were quite at their ease.

“We shall have plenty of things to show you,” said Aleck; “papa has given us all a half-holiday in honour of your arrival. There are my two rabbits, the black and the white one.”

“I like rabbit curry very much,” interrupted Adolphus.

"Oh, but you are not to eat them!" exclaimed little Laura in alarm, shocked at the idea of cooking her favourites.

"And there is the garden," continued Aleck; "We have made two arches across the gravel-walk, and such beautiful creepers are twined round them; and there is a famous bower at the end of it—we helped to pave it with pebbles ourselves."

"And there's a cow!" cried Laura; "you shall see her milked!"

"Then we will have some syllabub, that we will!" exclaimed Adolphus.

The little Robys looked at each other, and then glanced at their mother, in astonishment at such a bold and unusual proposal. The lady, somewhat to their surprise, gave a smiling consent, and poured out nearly a tumbler-full of home-made wine in preparation for this unwonted treat.

"This is not so bad," thought Constantine; "I daresay we'll have some fun here. I shall like to tease that prim puss Miss Bertha a little, who looks as though she considered it wrong to open her mouth; and we'll bring down Master Aleck a peg or two - he thinks himself mighty clever, I can see."

"This is a great deal better than school,"—such were the reflections of Adolphus. "The master looks mild enough, the lady is the picture of good-nature, and these people don't appear to be shabby, although they are certainly poor."

Yes, Mr. Roby was poor; even had his income been double what it was, one so generous and benevolent would still have been poor. He could not afford to give Aleck, his only son, the advantage of a school, but this seemed no misfortune to the affectionate father; he preferred conducting his boy's education himself. Aleck was naturally clever, and, under the careful training of his parent, had made uncommon progress in his studies. If there was anything on earth of which the

clergyman was proud, it was the talents and goodness of his son.

Quiet and reserved as Mr. Roby was, it was no small trial to him to introduce strangers into his peaceful home, though these strangers were the nephews of an intimate friend; it



Helping at Lessons

was a sacrifice of inclination to duty. But his wife, in encouraging him to make this sacrifice, had other reasons beyond increasing their small means, or obliging the aunt of

the Probyns. Mrs. Roby, with her clear common sense, saw that it was not good for her Aleck to have no companion but his sisters. They were both younger than himself, and looked up to him in everything. He helped them in their lessons, took the lead in their amusements, and was loved by them with the fondest affection. What wonder if the boy was becoming a little spoiled; he was of too much importance in the quiet home-circle; he could not but feel that his parents were proud of him—that his sisters regarded him as one who could scarcely do wrong; he grew too fond of giving his opinion—too self-confident, and his mother saw it. Hers was, however, the eye of partial affection, and she had little idea how often those who had been gratifying her husband by praising the uncommon talents and virtues of their son, behind his back spoke of him as “a conceited boy, who loved to hear himself talk, who was ruined by being brought up at home, and would never be good for anything in the world.”

Oh, how startled should we often be, could we know the difference between what is said to us, and what is said of us; what a shock would our vanity receive, could we look beyond the smile of flatterers and see into their hearts!

CHAPTER 2

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

The next morning Aleck and his sisters met their mother in the breakfast-parlour before their guests had left their sleeping apartment. Mr. Roby was still engaged in his study, having as usual risen at five, that he might not leave one of his various duties neglected.

“Mamma,” said Bertha, after having received her morning’s kiss, “I am afraid that we shall not like these Probyns at all.”

“It is too early to decide upon their characters,” replied Mrs. Roby; “we must wait till we know them a little better.”

“I think Constantine a very disagreeable boy,” said Bertha; “he has a sort of—I don’t know what sort of manner, but it is not in the least like Aleck’s. It is as though he despised us for being girls; and he kicks his feet against the legs of the table, and never keeps still for a moment, and it fidgets

me so—I can't bear it!" The little girl's brow was all wrinkled over with frowns.

"And he's so naughty," said Laura, resting her arms on her mother's knee, and looking up gravely into her face. "He pulled the cow's tail, and would not leave off, and when we told him that it hurt her, he only laughed!"

"You should have seen how the boys quarrelled for the syllabub," continued Bertha, "pulling and struggling till half of it was thrown over between them."

"And they never let me have one drop," added Laura; "I think that they are shocking bad boys!"

"So they are," said Aleck, as he paused in his task of cutting the loaf for breakfast; "they never read their Bibles before going to bed, nor said their prayers neither, as far as I could tell." Aleck did not add—indeed, he did not consider, that although he himself had not omitted to kneel down, as he had been taught from his childhood to do, his thoughts had been so much taken up with his new companions, and drawing a contrast between their conduct and his own, that not a feeling of real devotion had given life to his heartless prayer.

"Not say their prayers!" cried Laura, looking more shocked than before; "did you ever think that there were such wicked boys?"

"And such stupid ones too," rejoined Aleck. "When I spoke to them about their lessons, Adolphus said, with a great yawn, that learning was a bore." Laura raised her eyebrows with an expression of arch surprise. "I offered to lend him my account of the famous Cook. 'Oh, I know all about him already,' said he; 'his name was Soyer, and he made a capital sauce!'" Here two merry dimples appeared on the little child's cheeks, and deepened as her brother proceeded:

“And when I asked him if he did not like Caesar, he thought that I was speaking of a dog, and inquired if he was one that would not bite!”

This overcame Laura's gravity altogether; she burst into such a merry ringing laugh that neither Bertha nor Aleck could help joining her heartily; and even Mrs. Roby, who was meditating a little lecture to her children on too hastily judging others, found it difficult to keep her countenance.

The entrance of the Probyns stopped the mirth of which they had been the subject. Breakfast passed over; then came hours of study, which served to strengthen Aleck in his opinion that his companions were very stupid boys. Adolphus appeared the dullest of the two; not that he naturally was so, but he had always been too lazy to learn. He stumbled at every word in his reading, spelt *pheasant* with an f, and *thumb* without a b, could not see any difference between a noun and a verb, and confused the Red Sea with the Black. Poor Mr. Roby, accustomed to an intelligent pupil, stifled a quiet sigh; and Aleck, with a feeling of vast superiority, could not hide the mingled surprise, amusement, and contempt, which the boy's ignorance called up in his own mind. The Probyns noticed the smile on his face, and it stung them more than a real injury would have done; while indulging his secret pride, Aleck was sowing in the hearts of his companions bitter feelings of resentment and hate.

After lessons, an hour was given to play in the garden; but anything but play it proved to Aleck, for the Probyns were determined to show him that, if he had more book-learning than they, he, a country boy, was ignorant of many things familiar to them from living in London. Without coming to an open quarrel, they made him feel that they disliked him, showed such open contempt for what he valued, and treated

his favourite pursuits with such scorn, that, irritated almost beyond his power of endurance by a trial to which he was unaccustomed, Aleck lost both his patience and his temper, and was laughed at for being so easily "put in a pet." It was fortunate for him that the time had now come for joining his mother and sisters in the parlour. The boys found the little ladies busy at their sewing; Mrs. Roby had quitted the room to see a poor woman who had come for advice and assistance.

"This is our nice half-hour with mamma," said Laura; "she always reads something to us before dinner while we work, and Aleck draws beside her."

"More reading!" exclaimed Adolphus, with no pleased look.

"Oh, but it's amusing reading!" said Laura. "There, Aleck dear, I've put your copy and pencil all ready for you; and I've not forgotten the India-rubber this morning, you see, though I am such a careless little thing!" Another time she would have been repaid by a smile and a kiss; but Aleck was in no mood for that now.

"Amusing reading! I wonder what you call amusing!" said Constantine, who, to Bertha's great annoyance, was occupying his idle fingers in turning over the contents of her work-box.

"Why, mamma has been reading to us little bits," said Laura; "only little bits such as I can understand, you know, of the history of good Mr. Budgett, the 'Successful Merchant.'"

"The Successful Merchant! I'll not stand that!" exclaimed Constantine, flinging Bertha's reels of cotton right and left, as she threw himself back in his chair.

"Oh, but it's so curious—so interesting—and all true! There's the story of the little donkey, and of the horse that was lost, and the great tea-party—things that amuse even me."

"Amuse a stupid girl like you; but"—

"If you talk about stupidity," cried Aleck, firing up, "let me tell you"—

Oh, how thankful the girls were for the entrance of their mother at this moment! To see flushed faces, fiery looks, clenched fists, was so new to them, that, in terror lest their darling brother should be drawn into a quarrel and be hurt, poor little Laura could scarcely restrain her tears, and Bertha, as she stooped to pick up her reels, wished from her heart that these odious new-comers had never arrived to break the peaceful serenity of Dove's Nest.

Mrs. Roby's quick eye instantly detected that there had been words amongst the children; she thought it best, however, to take no notice of this, and opening a little drawer in her table, took out of it a manuscript book.

"I have been thinking what kind of reading might serve to entertain you all, uniting some instruction with amusement." Constantine turned down his lips at the word instruction. He thought that the lady did not see him. "Here is an allegory—a sort of tale which contains a hidden meaning beneath the apparent one—and"—

"But I don't like hearing reading, ma'am," interrupted Adolphus, with much more candour than good manners.

"No kind of reading?" inquired Mrs. Roby, in perfect good-humour.

"I think, then, that this book may suit your taste; it is the story of a Giant-killer."

"Oh, some story-books, and fairy-tales, I don't mind them, if I've nothing better to amuse me."

"Jack the Giant-killer! Oh, I've heard that a thousand times!" cried Adolphus, while the Robys could scarcely help laughing at the idea of their mother reading such a story to them.

"Mine is a new Giant-killer—a great hero, I can assure you," said the lady; "and I think that my tale is a better one than that with which you are so well acquainted, as it contains a great deal that is true."

"Why, there are no giants now!" cried Constantine.

"I am not so sure of that," replied Mrs. Roby; "I believe that we might find both giants and giant-killers in the world at this time, if we only knew where to look for them."

"I should like to hear this story," said Constantine, afraid of the lady's returning to the "Successful Merchant."



Winding the Skein

"Then perhaps you would kindly wind this skein of silk for me while I read," said Mrs. Roby, willing to save an unfortunate tidy from the fingers which were now picking at its fringe. "There, let me find the end for you. I am sure that Adolphus will oblige me by turning the skein while you

wind; and, now that you are all busily employed, I will at once begin my little book.”

CHAPTER 3

GIANT SLOTH

It was the still hour of twilight. The moon still shone in the deep blue sky; but her light was becoming pale and dim. The stars had gone out, one by one, and a red flush in the east, deepening into crimson just behind the hill, showed where the sun would shortly appear.

A knight lay stretched on the mossy ground; his head reclined on a shield, his two-handed sword girt to his side—even in sleep his hand rested on the hilt. This was the brave champion Fides, the chosen knight to whom had been given mighty treasures and a golden crown by the King whom he had served from his childhood. But he was not yet to enter into possession of his riches, he was not yet to wear his bright crown; hard labours, great dangers were before him—he was to fight before he might enjoy. So Fides was to pass alone through the enemy's land, to slay every giant who should oppose him on the way. His King had provided him with strong armour, and with a wondrous sword which gave cer-

tain victory if he who drew it shrank not back like a coward, or yielded to the foe like a traitor; he had, in truth, nothing to fear but his own slackness in fight; if but faithful, he must be triumphant.

The knight slept soundly on his soft couch, for he was weary with long travel that night. He was roused by the touch of a hand, so light that the dew could hardly have rested more gently on his shoulder; and yet there was something in the power of that touch which not only broke his slumbers, but restored to him in a moment all his waking powers. He started up, and beheld before him a beautiful messenger sent by his King. Her robe was of woven light, a starry crown was upon her head, and the glance of her eye penetrated the heart, and laid open its most in most feelings. Fides recognized Conscience, his companion and friend, who, invisible to all eyes but his own, had come on an errand to the knight.

"Sleeping still!" she exclaimed, "with your labours all to come—sleeping on the enemy's ground! Rouse you, recreant champion, and draw your sword; see you not yon towers before you? It is there that Giant Sloth holds his court; you cannot pass on until he is slain. This is the hour to attack him in his hold; soon after sunrise he quits it to roam abroad; if not attacked early, he will escape your pursuit;—on, then, and victory attend you!"

"O Conscience, I am weary!" Fides replied; "a little more rest may be mine! The sun is scarcely seen above yon ridge; grant me another hour's slumber."

"Go at once," replied the bright one, "or you go in vain."

"But how make my way into the castle?"

"Press the hilt of your sword against the heaviest door, and it will open as if by a key."

"But if difficulties should arise, or doubts perplex me."



Knight Fides and Conscience

“Breathe upon the hilt of your sword, and you will behold me beside you. Though unseen, I will ever be near you. Delay not now, for, look at the sun, what a flood of light he pours on the world! When the great clock in the giant’s tower strikes six, it will be too late to encounter him that day; he may vanish before your eyes, but neither be conquered nor slain. Go!” And even as the words were upon her lips, the bright one vanished from his sight.

With rapid step and a resolute spirit, Fides sped on to his first encounter. The way was plain before him; not even

the youngest child could have mistaken it. In front arose the castle of Giant Sloth, whose heavy, shapeless mass looked as though it had been built of clouds. Fides, sword in hand, pressed up to the door; it was open, as if to invite his entrance, and he once proceeded into the large hall.

A strange scene of confusion was there; the whole place was littered with unfinished work, blotted pages and blank ones, play-books torn and without their backs, dresses in rags, and neglected volumes with leaves yet uncut. But the strangest thing was the feeling of heaviness and dullness which stole over the knight the moment that he entered the hall. It seemed too much trouble even to pass through its length; he would fain have laid himself down and slept. The place was very still, the only sound heard was that of some one heavily breathing in a room that was near; Fides doubted not that this was the giant himself.

Animated with the hope of gaining his first triumph, the knight resolutely struggled against the sleepy sensation which made the danger of that enchanted hall. He passed through it, and found at the end that what he at a distance had mistaken for a wall, was only a huge web, like that which the house-spider weaves; not the light net-work which is strung with bright beads of dew, but thick, close, and darkened with dust. Through this strange curtain Fides with some difficulty could see into the inner room where the giant lay asleep.

Sloth's huge, clumsy form was half sunk in a great heap of down, not a feather of which stirred in the heavy air, except such as were moved by his breathing. Here, then, was the knight, and there was his foe, but how was the first to reach the latter! Only the web was between, and Fides threw his whole weight against it, hoping easily thus to get through; not so, it bent, but it did not break—every thread in

the yielding curtain seemed as strong as though it had been made of iron wire.

Fides drew back disappointed and surprised; something that was not weariness, but possessed the same power to deaden energy and make effort disagreeable, seemed pressing his spirit down. His eyelids grew heavy, he could scarcely keep them open, he felt a strong and increasing desire to indulge the sleepiness which had now come over him. But there was an object before him which made him struggle against the enchantment. Just above the feathery couch of the giant was a huge clock, with a dial of silver and numbers of gold, and the hand, which glittered with many a gem, had almost touched the point of six.

"Now or never!" thought Fides, with another strong effort, as he remembered the words of Conscience. Again the web yielded to his weight, but not the smallest flaw appeared in its fine texture to give him hope of succeeding in breaking through.

"Ding-ding-ding!" the hand is at six—the giant is beginning to stir! Fides with sudden resolution lifts his sword on high, down it descends on the web, which, as the blow divides it, starts back on each side till a very wide gap appears. Fides springs through the opening, he is just in time, and the next moment Giant Sloth lies dead at his feet.

"Well," exclaimed Adolphus, with a comical expression on his face, as soon as Mrs. Roby had closed her book, "I suspect that this story, from beginning to end, is all a hit upon me."

"I thought that it was a hit upon me," said little Laura, "when I heard of the broken-backed play-books, and the room in such shocking disorder!"

"It might have been a hit upon me," thought Bertha, who,



Fides Slays the Giant Sloth

indolent by disposition, had felt the moral touch her in the description of unfinished work.

“It is a hit upon no one,” replied Mrs. Roby, “unless any person present chooses to consider himself as Giant Sloth or one of his brotherhood. Your faults are your enemies, the greatest enemies of those over whom they exercise the greatest power. Pray, at this our first reading of ‘the Giant-killer,’ let me impress this strongly upon your minds. I would not

hurt the feelings of one of my listeners, far less would I encourage them to find out and laugh at the follies of each other. My desire is to lead you to consider that you are all and each of you yourselves in the position of my hero. The foes which he had to conquer you also must fight; you have the same aid to encourage you, the same motives to rouse. The same giant may not be equally formidable to you all, but everyone has some enemy with whom he must struggle, in a strength that is given to him, armour not his own."

"Ah!" said Aleck, "I was sure that there was some meaning in that part of the story. The two-handed sword also, which nothing could resist"—

"What was that?" interrupted Constantine.

"I would rather that you should discover that for yourself," said Mrs. Roby. "If the kernel of an allegory be good, it is worth the trouble of cracking the shell."

"Oh, but I hate all trouble!" cried Adolphus; "above all, the trouble of thinking."

"Take care, take care," laughed little Laura, "or we shall suspect that you have been caught by Giant Sloth."