

The House of Dreams

By Minna Irving

A TOURING party in an automobile was overtaken by night and a thunderstorm at an old inn in the forest. Thick branches of pine, hemlock, oak and beech met above the decaying and sunken roof, and a luxuriant growth of ivy framed the small dingy panes of the shutterless windows. A decrepit old woman with a candle met them at the door and served supper in the low-ceiled, smoke-begrimed room termed by courtesy the parlor, and afterward escorted them along the bare echoing passages to tiny bed-chambers under the sloping eaves. The party consisted of a young woman noted for her beauty and coquetry, a lady of mature years distinguished for her love of dress, an elderly man devoted to amassing gold by any and every means in his power, and the chauffeur, who was part of his machine, and lived, breathed and moved to the impulse of speed.

They all met next morning at the door of the inn to continue their journey. None had desired any breakfast, and all were pale and silent, and had apparently rested ill. No one spoke until the car was moving slowly forward on the lonely road, and the inn was lost to sight among the trees.

"How did you sleep?" queried the elderly financier of the ladies.

"I had horrible dreams," they chorused in reply.

"I, too," echoed the chauffeur.

Then each in turn proceeded to tell his or her experience, beginning with the youthful coquette.

"I was no sooner between the sheets," she said, "than I was suddenly transported to a region where unutterable silence reigned, and it was very cold. I was entirely without clothes—not so much as the traditional fig leaf hid my nakedness, and I was literally starving, while in addition to the pangs of hunger I suffered burning thirst. A dish was set before me by unseen hands. It consisted of human hearts, each one broken in half, and still quivering with remnants of life. I turned from it, shuddering with horror, and reached for a golden goblet which stood beside it.

"The goblet was brimming with blood. The cold grew more intense, and I shook with icy tremors, when a cloak was cast across my bare knees, now violet-tinted where they were pinched by the bitter winds. The cloak was made of human skins, still raw and bleeding, and starving, thirsting, shivering, I awoke."

Her story was received without remark, and the woman of fashion next spoke.

"The moon," she said, "was a great flashing mirror, and I stood before it, surrounded by towering piles of dresses of every color, cut and fabric, which I was engaged in trying on. As soon as a dark, shadowy form, which was always behind me, but which I could never see face to face, had fastened one gown into place on me it was immediately whisked off and another was hooked, tied, buttoned, and pinned upon my weary body. My limbs tottered, my back and head ached excruciatingly, I was faint and dizzy, but still that awful trying-on process never ceased, and still the great piles of frocks instead of diminishing were piled up around me by invisible hands until the mass of finery seemed about to fall upon and smother me. I started up in bed suffused from head to foot with a cold sweat of agony, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness as I saw the gray dawn filtering through the ivied window."

The financier told the next tale of woe:

"I tolled through the ether with a great bag of gold on my back. Other bags were in my bulging pockets, and I carried one in each hand. Every star that glittered in the firmament was a gigantic mountain of glistening gold dust from which I had to fill the bags I carried, and empty the minto the black abyss of eternity. Ages and ages I slaved at my herculean task with never a

minute's rest from my labors, and as I shoveled away at one star after another until the last ounce of the yellow metal of which it was composed had gone into the bags and been duly emptied into the void beyond, new stars of gold appeared in the distance, and I knew that I must toil on forever. I labored in a cloud of the shining dust, it filled my lungs to suffocation, it gritted between my teeth, it clung like fine snow to my hair and shoulders, covered my hands so thickly that my fingers moved with great difficulty as though encased in metallic gloves, and obscured my vision with an auriferous mist. This was my judgment and my doom."

When his hoarse voice died away, there was silence for fully five minutes. His story, like the coquette's, needed no comment, the lesson was plain.

The leather-coated chauffeur was the first to speak, slowing the car down until it barely moved through the murmuring vistas of woodland.

"I, too, was among the stars," he said, "and found the twinkling lights in the night sky to be the lamps of innumerable automobiles whizzing around on invisible tracks through the ether. Seated in one of the biggest of them, I was speeding down the Milky Way at a terrific pace.

Each side of me yawned a bottomless abyss of empty ether, and far ahead the endless silvery road stretched before me, a narrow ribbon of light from which the slightest swerve would precipitate me into space. The cold air seared my eyeballs like fire and stopped my breath. My spine ached as if pierced with a million red-hot needles, my arms stiffened with the awful strain, and I moved the steering wheel mechanically, while the terrific clip at which I was traveling constantly increased. Comets crumbled beneath by flying wheels, a trail of scintillating star dust hovered behind me, and I narrowly avoided collision with the sun and moon as I flew. But when, sick and throbbing from head to foot with intense weariness, I strove to slacken my mad pace, a terrible voice that filled the vast spaces of the sky and reverberated through unguessable deserts of distance bade me in thunder tones: "Speed on!"

"Centuries passed like seconds in my wild flight through eternity, and I beheld great worlds darken and die into masses of cinders that still continued to revolve in their orbits, a constant menace to my lurching, rocking car, and to the cars of other chauffeurs that traversed the universe in different directions, each driver bound to his wheel forever by a sentence from which there was no appeal.

"And the whole immense vault was filled with the road of count-

less wheels, and the ceaseless throbbing of millions of motors all blending in a mighty diapason of sound which was dominated by that awful bodiless voice which from time to time issued its grim command: "Speed on!"

The chauffeur's dream was also heard without comment, perhaps because there was nothing to say since each had had a similar uncanny experience in the House of Dreams.

But strange to relate, when the party again entered the forest on the return trip no inn was to be seen on the spot where they had passed such a disagreeable night, only a heap of moldering timbers and the remains of a fallen chimney over which trailed wild blackberry vines and poison ivy, the growth of many years.



FOR EVERY PURPOSE
Write to
FINKE BROS.

183 Madison St. Portland, Oregon.



Malt Rainier is the Pure Malt Tonic
For Mothers Who Require Additional
Nourishment and Strength.

ASK YOUR PHYSICIAN

For Sale by All Druggists