

The Firefly

By Richard Garnett

A certain Magician had retired for the sake of study to a cottage in a forest. It was summer in a hot country. In the trees near the cottage dwelt a most beautiful Firefly. The light she bore with her was dazzling, yet soft and palpitating, as the evening star, and she seemed a single flash of fire as she shot in and out suddenly from under the screen of foliage, or like a lamp as she perched panting upon some leaf, or hung glowing from some bough; or like a wandering meteor as she eddied gleaming over the summits of the loftiest trees; as she often did, for she was an ambitious Firefly. She learned to know the Magician, and would sometimes alight and sit shining in his hair, or trail her lustre across his book as she crept over the pages. The Magician admired her above all things:

“What eyes she would have if she were a woman!” thought he.

Once he said aloud:

“How happy you must be, you rare, beautiful, brilliant creature!”

“I am not happy,” rejoined the Firefly; “what am I, after all, but a flying beetle with a candle in my tail? I wish I were a star.”

“Very well,” said the Magician, and touched her with his wand, when she became a beautiful star in the twelfth degree of the sign Pisces.

After some nights the Magician asked her if she was content.

“I am not,” replied she. “When I was a Firefly I could fly whither I would, and come and go as I pleased. Now I must rise and set at certain times, and shine just so long and no longer. I cannot fly at all, and only creep slowly across the sky. In the day I cannot shine, or if I do no one sees me. I am often darkened by rain, and mist, and cloud. Even when I shine my brightest I am less admired than when I was a Firefly, there are so many others like me. I see, indeed, people looking up from the earth by night towards me, but how do I know that they are looking at me?”

“The laws of Nature will have it so,” returned the Magician.

“Don’t talk to me of the laws of Nature,” rejoined the Firefly. “I did not make them, and I don’t see why I should be compelled to obey them. Make me something else.”

“What would you be?” demanded the accommodating Magician.

“As I creep along here,” replied the Star, “I see such a soft pure track of light. It proceeds from the lamp in your study. It flows out of your window like a river of molten silver, both cool and warm. Let me be such a lamp.”

“Be it so,” answered the Magician: and the star became a lovely alabaster lamp, set in an alcove in his study. Her chaste radiance was shed over his page as long as he continued to read. At a certain hour he extinguished her and retired to rest.

Next morning the Lamp was in a terrible humour.

“I don’t choose to be blown out,” she said.

“You would have gone out of your own accord else,” returned the Magician.

“What!” exclaimed the Lamp, “am I not shining by my own light?”

“Certainly not: you are not now a Firefly or a Star. You must now depend upon others. You would be dark for ever if I did not rekindle you by the help of this oil.”

“What!” cried the Lamp, “not shine of my own accord! Never! Make me an everlasting lamp, or I will not be one at all.”

“Alas, poor friend,” returned the Magician sadly, “there is but one place where aught is everlasting. I can make thee a lamp of the sepulchre.”

“Content,” responded the Lamp. And the Magician made her one of those strange occult lamps which men find ever and anon when they unseal the tombs of ancient kings and wizards, sustaining without nutriment a perpetual flame. And he bore her to a sepulchre where a great king was lying embalmed and perfect in his golden raiment, and set her at the head of the corpse. And whether the poor fitful Firefly found at last rest in the grave, we may know when we come thither ourselves. But the Magician closed the gates of the sepulchre behind him, and walked thoughtfully home. And as he approached his cottage, behold another Firefly darting and flashing in and out among the trees, as brilliantly as ever the first had done. She was a wise Firefly, well satisfied with the world and everything in it, more particularly her own tail. And if the Magician would have made a pet of her no doubt she would have abode with him. But he never looked at her.