

# The Talismans

By Richard Garnett

What a wondrous creature is man! What feats the humblest among us perform, which, if related of another order of beings, we should deem incredible!

By what magic could the young student escape the weary old professor, who was prosily proving Time merely a form of thought; a proposition of which, to judge by the little value he appeared to set on the subject of his discourse, he must himself have been fully persuaded? Without exciting his suspicions in the smallest degree, the student stole away to a region inconceivably remote, and presented himself at the portal of a magnificent palace, guarded by goblins, imps, lions, serpents, and monsters whose uncouthness forbids description.

A singular transformation seemed to have befallen the student. In the professor's class he had been noted as timid, awkward, and painfully respectful. He now strode up with an air of alacrity and defiance, brandishing a roll of parchments, and confronted the seven principal goblins, by whom he was successively interrogated.

"Hast thou undergone the seven probations?"

"Yes," said the student.

"Hast thou swallowed the ninety-nine poisons?"

"Ninety-nine times each," said the student.

"Hast thou wedded a Salamander, and divorced her?"

"I have," said the student.

"Art thou at this present time betrothed to a Vampire?"

"I am," said the student.

"Hast thou sacrificed thy mother and sister to the infernal powers?"

"Of course," said the student.

"Hast thou attestations of all these circumstances under the hands and seals of a thousand and one demons?"

The student displayed his parchments.

"Thou hast undergone every trial," pronounced the seventh goblin; "thou hast won the right to enter the treasury of the treasurer of all things, and to choose from it any one talisman at thy liking."

The imps cheered, the goblins congratulated, the serpents shrank hissing away, the lions fawned upon the student, a centaur bore him upon his back to the treasurer's presence.

The treasurer, an old bent man, with a single lock of silvery hair, received the adventurer with civility.

"I have come," said the student, "for the talismans in thy keeping, to the choice among which I have entitled myself."

"Thou hast fairly earned them," replied the old man, "and I may not say thee nay. Thou canst, however, only possess any of them in the shape which it has received at my hands during the long period for which these have remained in my custody."

"I must submit to the condition," said the student.

"Behold, then, Aladdin's lamp," said the ancient personage, tendering a tiny vase hardly bigger than a pill-box, containing some grains of a coarse, rusty powder.

"Aladdin's lamp!" cried the student.

“All of it, at least, that I have seen fit to preserve,” replied the old man. “Thou art but just in time for this even. It is proper to apprise thee that the virtues of the talisman having necessarily dwindled with its bulk, it is at present incompetent to evoke any Genie, and can at most summon an imp, of whose company thou wilt never be able to rid thyself, inasmuch as the least friction will inevitably destroy what little of the talisman remains.”

“Confusion!” cried the young man. “Show me, then, Aladdin’s ring.”

“Here,” replied the old man, producing a plain gold hoop.

“This, at least,” asked the student, “is not devoid of virtue?”

“Assuredly not, if placed on the finger of some fair lady. For, its magic properties depending wholly upon certain engraved characters, which I have gradually obliterated, it is at present unadapted to any other use than that of a wedding-ring, which it would subserve to admiration.”

“Produce another talisman,” commanded the youth.

“These,” said the ancient treasurer, holding up two shapeless pieces of leather, “are the shoes of swiftness, incomparable until I wore them out.”

“This, at least, is bright and weighty,” exclaimed the student, as the old man displayed the sword of sharpness.

“In truth a doughty weapon,” returned the treasurer, “if wielded by a stronger arm than thine, for it will no longer fly in the air and smite off heads of its own accord, since the new blade hath been fitted to the new hilt.”

After a hasty inspection of the empty frame of a magic mirror, and a fragment of the original setting of Solomon’s seal, the youth’s eye lighted upon a volume full of mysterious characters.

“Whose book is this?” he inquired. “Heavens, it is Michael Scott’s!”

“Even so,” returned the venerable man, “and its spells have lost nothing of their efficacy. But the last leaf, containing the formula for dismissing spirits after they have been summoned from the nether world, hath been removed by me. Inattention to this circumstance hath caused several most respectable magicians to be torn in pieces, and hath notably increased the number of demons at large.”

“Thou old villain!” shouted the exasperated youth, “is this the way in which the treasures in thy custody are protected by thee? Deemest thou that I will brook being thus cheated of my dear-bought talisman? Nay, but I will deprive thee of thine. Give me that lock of hair.”

“O good youth,” supplicated the now terrified and humbled old man “bereave me not of the source of all my power. Think, only think of the consequences!”

“I will not think,” roared the youth. “Deliver it to me, or I’ll rend it from thy head with my own hands.”

With a heavy sigh, Time clipped the lock from his brow and handed it to the youth, who quitted the place unmolested by any of the monsters.

Entering the great city, the student made his way by narrow and winding streets until, after a considerable delay, he emerged into a large public square. It was crowded with people, gazing intently at the afternoon sky, and the air was rife with a confused murmur of altercations and exclamations.

“It is.” “No, I tell you, it is impossible.” “It cannot be.” “I see it move.” “No, it’s only my eyes are dazzled.” “Who could have believed it?” “Whatever will happen next?”

Following the gaze of the people, the youth discovered that the object of their attention was the sun, in whose aspect, however, he could discover nothing unusual.

“No,” a man by him was saying, “it positively has not moved for an hour. I have my instruments by me. I cannot possibly be mistaken.”

“It ought to have been behind the houses long ago,” said another.

“What’s o’clock?” asked a third. The inquiry made many turn their eyes towards the great clock in the square. It had stopped an hour ago. The hands were perfectly motionless. All who had watches simultaneously drew them from their pockets. The motion of each was suspended; so intense, in turn, was the hush of the breathless crowd, that you could have heard a single tick, but there was none to hear.

“Time is no more,” proclaimed a leader among the people.

“I am a ruined man,” lamented a watchmaker.

“And I,” ejaculated a maker of almanacks.

“What of quarter-day?” inquired a landlord and a tenant simultaneously.

“We shall never see the moon again,” sobbed a pair of lovers.

“It is well this did not happen at night,” observed an optimist.

“Indeed?” questioned the director of a gas company.

“I told you the Last Day would come in our time,” said a preacher.

It was still long before the people realised that the trance of Time had paralysed his daughter Mutability as well. Every operation depending on her silent processes was arrested. The unborn could not come to life. The sick could not die. The human frame could not waste. Every one in the enjoyment of health and strength felt assured of the perpetual possession of these blessings, unless he should meet with accident or violent death. But all growth ceased, and all dissolution was stayed. Mothers looked with despair on infants who could never be weaned or learn to walk. Expectant heirs gazed with dismay on immortal fathers and uncles. The reigning beauties, the fashionable boxers and opera dancers were in the highest feather. Nor did the intellectual less rejoice, counting on endless life and unimpaired faculties, and vowing to extend human knowledge beyond the conceivable. The poor and the outcast, the sick and the maimed, the broken-hearted and the dying made, indeed, a dismal outcry, the sincerity of which was doubted by some persons.

As for our student, forgetting his faithful Vampire, he made his way to a young lady of great personal attractions, to whom he had been attached in former days. The sight of her beauty, and the thought that it would be everlasting, revived his passion. To convince her of the perpetuity of her charms, and establish a claim upon her gratitude, he cautiously revealed to her that he was the author of this blissful state of things, and that Time’s hair was actually in his possession.

“Oh, you dear good man!” she exclaimed, “how vastly I am obliged to you! Ferdinand will never forsake me now.”

“Ferdinand! Leonora I thought you cared for *me*.”

“Oh!” she said, “you young men of science are so conceited!”

The discomfited lover fled from the house, and sought the treasurer’s palace. It had vanished with all its monsters. Long did he roam the city ere he mixed again with the crowd, which an old meteorologist was addressing energetically.

“I ask you one thing,” he was saying. “Will it ever rain again?”

“Certainly not,” replied a geologist and a metaphysician together. “Rain being an agent of Time in the production of change, there can be no place for it under the present dispensation.”

“Then will not the crops be burned up? Will the fruits mature? Are they not withering already? What of wells and rivers, and the mighty sea itself? Who will feed your cattle? And who will feed *you*?”

“This concerns us,” said the butchers and bakers.

“Us also,” added the fishmongers.

“I always thought,” said a philosopher, “that this phenomenon must be the work of some malignant wizard.”

“Show us the wizard that we may slay him,” roared the mob.

Leonora had been communicative, and the student was immediately identified by twenty persons. The lock of hair was found upon him, and was held up in sight of the multitude.

“Kill him!”

“Burn!”

“Crucify him!”

“It moves! it moves!” cried another division of the crowd. All eyes were bent on the hitherto stationary luminary. It was moving—no, it wasn’t; yes, it certainly was. Dared men believe that their shadows were actually lengthening? Was the sun’s rim really drawing nigh yonder great edifice? That muffled sound from the vast, silent multitude was, doubtless, the quick beating of innumerable hearts; but that sharper note? Could it be the ticking of watches? Suddenly all the public clocks clanged the first stroke of an hour—an absurdly wrong hour, but it *was* an hour. No mortal heard the second stroke, drowned in universal shouts of joy and gratitude. The student mingled with the mass, no man regarding him.

When the people had somewhat recovered from their emotion, they fell to disputing as to the cause of the last marvel. No scientific man could get beyond a working hypothesis. The mystery was at length solved by a very humble citizen, a barber.

“Why,” he said, “the old gentleman’s hair has grown again!”

And so it had! And so it was that the unborn came to life, the dying gave up the ghost, Leonora pulled out a grey hair, and the student told the professor his dream.