

## THE OLD MAN OF THE PEEPUL-TREE

By JAMES GRAHAME

At the office in Cortlandt street they had told Sieglinda Von Eichen that they had no further use for her services. She had been "cheeky," it seemed, to Mr. Grossmann. So she stood in Lower Broadway at eleven o'clock in the morning with exactly fifteen dollars in the world, and about as much prospect of a future as has the shell of a peanut. She was certainly not going to spend a nickel on the subway. It was not so very many miles to 108th street, and the day was a glory of May.

But when she reached Park Place she changed her mind. It would be no use returning to the tiny flat where she lived with her twin brother Siegmund; she would only disturb him, very likely at the critical moment of the last act of his great opera, the one that was really going to be accepted, and make them rich and famous.

She believed absolutely in her brother's genius; the sympathy between them was immense, even for twins. But Siegmund was incapable of any kind of work but the one. He had tried, when the necessity arose. Their father had died in their infancy; their mother had been induced to speculate by a rascally cousin, and in the crash of 1907 she had lost every penny. Siegmund had had to come back from Heidelberg, and Sieglinda from the family in Paris who were "finishing" her; their mother's brother, in New York, had offered them a home. They crossed the ocean. But their ill luck pursued them; a month or two later the uncle died intestate, and his son, who had always hated the twins as likely to come between him and his inheritance, lost no time in driving them from the house with insult. Between them they had had a few hundred dollars, enough to keep from starvation while they found something to do. Sieglinda did not know a note of music technically; though she had a fine ear and finer enthusiasm, all capacity in that line was concentrated in her brother; so she learnt stenography, and gave German lessons in the evening when she could get pupils.

Siegmund had enthusiastically decided to be a chauffeur; but his teacher had dissuaded him from proceeding. "I've a hunch," said he, "that there'll be trouble sooner or later; going off in them trances like a guy what's doped is hell when you're pushing a fast car — no, sir!" The same amiable impediment pursued him in every employment; his first morning as a clerk in a German Bank had been his last; for, having been entrusted with copying a list of figures into a ledger, he had broken off after about six lines, and filled five scrawling pages with the opening passages of a sonata which meant nothing to the bank.

Sieglinda quickly recognized that it was useless to try to alter this disposition; besides, she rather admired it. She cheerfully shouldered the whole responsibility of the finance of the family, telling him that it was really the best policy in the long run. Why waste a genius, capable of earning millions, for the sake of ten dollars a week? So she slaved on in various offices, never getting a good position; wherever she had happened to be, her aristocratic manner was one drawback, and her unapproachability another. Her "cheeking" of Mr. Grossmann had been, at bottom, a refusal to join him at supper.

So, after all, she would not go home. She would take the elevated and spend the day in Bronx Park. She would economize the nickel at lunch; a delicatessen picnic in the park would certainly be better than the flesh-pots of Childs'; yes, she would actually save money.

This calculation was, however, in error; her proposed squandering of the nickel was as fatal as Eve's first bite at the apple; and in the delicatessen store her lunch made a decidedly large hole in one of her dollars.

In another half-hour or so she was in the park; she wandered for awhile among the animals, then sought a remote corner for her picnic. She found a patch of green by the bank of the stream, shaded by a great peepul-tree, the sacred fig of India; and, having been born and bred to politeness, she apologized to the tree before taking her seat in its shadow. "Uncle Tree," so she began her prattle, "I hope you won't think it rude of me to introduce myself. But I am really a relative; my mother always said my father was the Old Man of the great oak in the courtyard; indeed, he was a very great elf, one of Wotan's own children, or so he always boasted. So I hope you'll let me eat my lunch under your branches. I'll pay rent, you know; I'll sing you the May-Song." Then she sang Heine's master-lyric:

"In the marvellous month of May  
With all its buds in blossom,  
Love made his holiday  
Prankt out within my bosom.

In the marvellous month of May  
With all its birds in choir,  
I caught her heart away  
With the song of my desire."

So, without further ceremony, she lay down and rested her back against the trunk of the peepul-tree, opened her package, and began her lunch.

When she had finished, and quenched her thirst in the stream, she returned to the tree and lit a cigarette.

Now then the point is — exactly when did Sieglinda doze off that afternoon? Even she admits that she was asleep part of the time; but she holds out stoutly that she was perfectly awake all the while that her cigarette lasted, for she remembers throwing the end away into the stream. And it was certainly while she was smoking that she began her conversation with the old man of the tree. "Uncle," she said, "you are much older than I am; I do wish you would give me some advice. I won't ask you hard things, for instance, what sin I committed in a previous life; for I must have, don't you think, to be out here in a country where they feed snakes and hyenas, and leave men and women to starve. No; but I do wish you could tell me where to look for a new job — and oh! I should like a decent one, somewhere where they had good manners, and didn't leer all the time, even if there was very little money in it!"

"My dear," replied the funny little old voice which she was sure came from the elf, "you couldn't have come to a better