

# **A WILDERNESS OF MONKEYS**

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A wilderness of monkeys by Frederick Niven

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**FREDERICK NIVEN**

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*By* *FREDERICK NIVEN* 

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*LONDON: MARTIN SECKER*

*NUMBER FIVE JOHN STREET ADELPHI MCMXI*

TO  
HOLBROOK JACKSON

*My excellent friend, you are a citizen of Athens, a city which is very great and very famous for wisdom and power of mind; are you not ashamed of caring so much for the making of money, and for reputation, and for honour? Will you not care or think about wisdom, and truth, and the perfection of your soul?*

*If any man have two loaves, let him sell one and buy of the white narcissus; for the one is food for the body and the other is food for the soul.*

*He who hath ears to hear, let him hear.*

## A WILDERNESS OF MONKEYS

### I

**B**LISS HENRY took train at Euston, had his ticket punched, and then let the world wag till he was travelling on a winding, single line far from the network of rails at Euston, the carriage window open to the upland air, fields of purple wavering past, with blue and grey rocks jutting up amidst them; and corried, crannied mountains, with birds and mists wavering athwart them, delighting him with their wildness; and, where the moors fanned out more widely, little pools and tarns lying like brazen shields or fallen suns. Or suddenly would come a hissing to the ears, a flash of white to the eyes; the rattle of the train would be lulled a moment, crossing a foaming river, and when the rattle leapt to life again there was a new picture in his heart, of a blue and brown river foaming into white over a linn, with a swirling pool below, and a long, glossy smoothness above, before the leap, where trees stood up dreamily against the afternoon sky; a quick vision of golden



flakes of sun, and green flakes of leaves, and flakes of light and shadow under the trees that went down to a little sweep of gleaming pebbles.

Then came the little junction town near the river's mouth (smelling jointly of fish and agriculture), and the change of trains; and Bliss Henry (you know whom I mean—author of *The Jewelled Snuff-Box* and *The Japanese Fan*) went on upon the last lap through the mellow land to his chosen place, the place out of London in which he was to find peace for his work.

As the landscape glowed and shone past (somewhat leisurely on that particular line), the sinuous railway curving farther into these recesses of peace whence the stream came sparkling, he was more than elated at his escape from London, at his freedom: the wild roses were to him the roses of Waller's and Ronsard's lyrics; the grass, of Parnassus; the stream, of Helicon. For he was free—and he was going away to write another book, the idea for which had long delightfully possessed him. And he carried with him a cheque for £100—enormous sum to a dreamer. He stilled his heart and looked out sanely, as well as intensely, and saw the highland stream swirling down through the quiet day, told himself he was going on holiday, but to work, just as surely as though he were still sitting in his back room in Chelsea; saw the stream

bordered by waving grass, patches of nettles, patches of bracken, with here and there tufts of heather. These wilderness patches ceased wholly here and there, or kept very close to the stream, giving place to patches of wheat or turnip fields. Wheat patches and patches of wilderness went billowing, and the two telegraph wires switchbacked irregularly past.

Bliss Henry took a long breath, gripped himself; he was losing the intoxication of freedom that had filled him rushing out of the glass-covered terminus in London, and tasting now, crawling to Solway by this branch line, its calm. He saw dog-roses and clover and bracken, and loved their names; saw flakes of mica shine in broken parts of the black banks, and was content that it was not gold he saw.

Violet and vine, cedar of Lebanon, onyx, chalcidony indeed! Who was he to sit artificially playing with words, making them exotic, when he had, at hand, the real thing? To a man who said of a wood of firs that it was like a cathedral he had once replied: "Let us keep in the open air. The insides of cathedrals make me long for forests; they stifle me. I am glad to get out of Saint Paul's always, and to see the outside instead; and, if a flutter of pigeons goes up it, their wings help me to imagine a cliff with gulls. You who see the pathos in a 'young lady' saying: 'Oh, how

beautiful these roses are—they are just like wax !' should see that"—and the friend had said : " You are right, Don Henry."

He bent forward closer to the open window. The wind, because of the passage of the train, made a little fluttering and patting there ; it fanned his cheeks, and he looked out newly.

He saw a yokel leaning on a scythe, a wain soaring over a hill-crest on a white road ; he took a great breath of the magic air. He heard the whir of a reaping machine, the brawling of the stream. He snuffed the air, redolent of peat, of wheat, of roses—of turnips, and the train went winding on, up stream, to Solway, where he was to find peace for his work.