

The Library of America • Story of the Week

Excerpt from *American Fantastic Tales: Terror and the Uncanny from Poe to the Pulps* (The Library of America, 2009), pages 371–385.

© 2009 Literary Classics of the U.S., Inc.

Originally appeared in *Harper's* (March 1910) and reprinted in the story collection *Vanishing Points* (1913).

ALICE BROWN

(1857–1948)

Golden Baby

WE were in the *Sycorax* smoking-room, within an hour of turning the lights out for the night. The air was gray with smoke, and everybody, even the men that made it, looked dulled by it. The scion of one of our oldest families, who had seized the occasion of an ocean voyage for extravagant over-indulgence, sat at a little table, monotonously repeating, “She was the fairest of all the country round,” in a tone of eccentric rhetorical emphasis. Nobody took any notice of him, because we had ceased doing that when he introduced us, one by one, to the aura of his ancestor who had “preceded Sir Philip Sidney at the battle of Zutphen.” What he meant by that initiatory phrase we never knew. We were merely convinced, one after another, by the sound of it, that we weren’t strong enough to hear it again. The man who was travelling round the globe on his own private fortune to discover a parasite for hostile bugs was absorbedly making diagrams of larvæ and what he called winged coleoptera for a buyer of seersucker, who was not listening to him, and the big fellow with the grizzled beard and the William Morris look of the eyes was sunk in some private reverie of his own. Suddenly the clerical young fellow opposite him asked him a question, whereupon he leaned back in his chair, gripped the beer glass before him as if he might sling it, and began, in a voice like a bell:

“Logic is a fool. The mystery your calling is founded on is no more a mystery than a million others. You simply fail to get the connections. I could tell you a dozen tales more unaccountable than that, because they’re just ripped out of the air and made manifest. It’s as if you should go out there on deck and see a film of some kind of impalpable parchment hanging from the topmast. You’d send up a man, he’d bring it down to you, and you’d find on it characters you could seem to read; but the story they made would say nothing whatever to you. I

Are you receiving Story of the Week each week?

Sign up now at storyoftheweek.loa.org to receive our weekly alert so you won’t miss a single story!

mean, it couldn't be hitched on to the general course of things. Now I'll give you a case in point."

He had given us no cases in point throughout the voyage. He had simply rowed about labor and capital, and said one was as bad as the other, capital being only labor reversed, and we thought we had discovered his pet nursling of a fad and just what road it was leading him. Now two or three other men looked up, and then moved a little nearer. They scented story as you do when you buy the new magazine and are lolling on having it to go to bed on. The scion of the noble family leaned back in his chair, regarded us haughtily, and said, "What's all this?" in a loud tone nobody noticed except discouragingly because he was making more noise. We left him to the solace of it, and drew up in a circle about the William Morris man. He had put the tip of his blunt finger—the kind of digit artisans work wonders with—delicately into a little pond of beer on the table and drawn out a line from it like a peninsula. Then he dabbled his finger again and put it down in another place, to make an island, and another. A merchant of many sorts of goods, who sailed all seas, burst out there, with a sudden recognition:

"Why, you're making islands!"

A white-faced young man of no breadth and inconsiderable stature, who, we understood, had some reputation as a poet of the minor variety, bent over the table and put on his large horn-bowed spectacles to look. He, too, spoke with an irrational quickness, as if everything the William Morris man did suddenly bore a meaning. It seemed as if the man had turned on his battery and we had become aware of his voltage.

"Do you suppose that's how God did it?" asked the little poet. "Before He 'came to the making of man'?"

But the William Morris man never answered him. He did look up at the merchant.

"Yes," he said, "it's the West Indies." Then he hunched his big frame back in his chair and began speaking, rather slowly and in a quiet voice, as if what he had to tell bore for him a significance of a particular and really a solemn nature.

"It was a week before Christmas when we sailed. Some company—it was a bum company and went to pieces afterward when its unseaworthy boats had all gone cranky, one way or

another, and the public had turned back to the old standbys that rule the wave and sap the pocket—this company—I forget the name—had bought an old boat for a song and a promise, knocked out bulkheads, furbished up some dog-holes for new staterooms, put in red velvet and gilding, called her the *Siren*, and advertised a grand excursion to the West Indies. Somehow the idea took. It had been a nasty winter, there was easy money, and without much delay the *Siren's* list was full. I was among the first to take passage. I was done up that winter with statistics and the devilry of the rich and, besides, I'd always wanted a sniff of sugar, rum and spices on their own ground. When I went on board there was a great copper sunset; it looked as if it belonged to the land exclusively and we might never have a whack at such another when we'd left New York behind us. I turned to look at it, as I'd been turning all the way along, and I stood there till the splendors and banners of it blinded me. So when I went aboard things were dark before me momentarily, in queer shapes, the outlines of warehouses and such, and I didn't feel that I'd really seen anything, until, on the deck at the end of the gangplank, I came face to face with a coolie woman, the thinnest of her sort, with bare feet and legs, bare arms, the slightest possible garment, and a weight of silver bangles on her wrists and collars round her neck. She stood there holding a child, a baby with a queer expression of maturity, and her eyes as she looked at me were black and solemn. They seemed to talk in a language of their own, to sing things maybe, chant 'em—talking wasn't good enough—and they made me shiver. The child sat there supported on the crook of her arm and looked at me as seriously as she did, but with a kind of well-wishing, too, as if he said:

“‘Old man, you're tired, aren't you? Everybody's tired. Glad you're shut of little old New York for a spell. Wish all of 'em could do the same.’

“What came into my mind—I don't see why—was that he was a kind of golden baby. Maybe it was because he had bright hair—an image to be worshipped—and my mind said inside, as plain as your lips might speak it, ‘Golden Baby!’ I felt I liked him, too, better than any piece of littleness I'd ever seen. And then, in the same minute—for it all passed as quickly as you might set your foot on deck and lift the other foot to keep it

company—the coolie woman and the golden baby were gone, and there was a spot of blackness where he'd been.

“A sailor was passing me with an end of a rope.

“Where's the woman?” I asked, before I could stop myself.

“He gave me a glance, and said, ‘Sir?’ without stopping, because he was evidently on business of the ship.

“The woman and the child,’ I called after him.

“I felt I'd got to know. But he shook his head and went along, and I felt disappointed, as if I'd lost something. But there was one queer thing. A darkness in the outline of the child stood before my eyes until I'd got into my stateroom and after. I couldn't rub it away.

“Well, gentlemen, that voyage was a corker for sheer madness of the human creature let loose. We hadn't been a day out before I knew what we'd got aboard—mothers that regarded the boat as a summer hotel and had fitted out their daughters with every rag known to milliners, to sell 'em in the market of some rich man's desire. That was the first—exhibit A. Then there were copper kings whose copper queens hadn't any chance to show off their diamonds and pearls and loot of the earth and sea in the regulation manner, and brought it all on board to flout the moon and stars, I guess, and the Creator of the moon and stars, and the other folks He'd made that had more or hadn't so many, each in a different way. It was all money and class hatred and scorn and contumely.”

Here the scion of a noble stock broke in, his dreary drone addressed to none of us in particular:

“Sir Philip Sidney, let me inform you. Sir Philip Sidney! Battle of Zutphen!”

“That's it,” said the William Morris man, quietly. “That just it. There were a few of 'em on board just like him. They'd had ancestors at Zutphen, and they wouldn't speak to the Semitic walking diamond-shops, nor me because I said I'd been in a foundry, nor the captain even, because he wasn't a *von*. Intercourse was restricted because they could only speak to one another, and they'd trodden that ground so long that they had only common recollections to go on, and I felt they were the best bored set on the boat. But in spite of all the hatreds and mildew of exclusiveness, the same old farce obtained that they were all enjoying themselves immensely. The decks were can-

vassed in nearly every night and the stars shut out, so that those apes of various degrees could put on their gimcracks borrowed from the earth and sea, and dance and strut under the light of electric bulbs with backgrounds of flags and paper garlands. Great Israel! I wonder the Lord of all don't turn His face away from the whole bloomin' show sometimes and say, 'I'm sick of vaudeville.'

"Well, as days went on, I can't tell you how or why, I began to be conscious of hate, hate everywhere. Whether it was the heat and madness of the tropics that got into our blood and set it seething, I don't know, or whether it was the revenge of big nature rising up against fool civilization—we were separated into as many little cliques and parties as the factions in a South-American state. I was out of the whole thing, not because I was better, but because I was worse. They hated one another, and I hated them all with a glorious impartiality. We'd gone due south, struck Jamaica, steamed on to the Isthmus, and then skirted the coast to Trinidad and dipped down beyond the mouth of the Orinoco, with the Southern Cross dominant now and the Dipper selling short. And suddenly one night about eleven, when the band was whanging away at a popular waltz and girls were swishing their muslins and laces round the deck in time, the boat stopped. You know there's always an underconsciousness of danger at sea, in the thickest-hided. No man forgets he's over an unplumbed abyss, except maybe he's in his cups and taking the return trip to Zutphen. So when the motion—there wasn't much of it on that sea—when it fell into a calm, the dancing grigs stopped, I suppose as the dancers did in 'Belgium's capital' when George Osborne got his summons to go and be killed, and wondered what the god of the machinery was going to do to them. We stopped, and we stayed so. I was on the hurricane-deck, and I came down with that same premonition of panic in me—I'm an old sailor, but I did feel actual panic—and the first man I met, making his thirty-six-inch strides along the deck, was the second officer. He was a good fellow; I hadn't hated him. We'd chummed together quite a lot on the voyage. I've grinned since to think how I greeted him inanely.

"'We've stopped,' said I.

"'Yes,' said he, two paces away from me.

“‘What for?’ I called, knowing I shouldn’t be told.

“‘Don’t know, sir,’ he returned. I knew he was entrenched in official reserve and not the accessible fellow I’d smoked my pipe with.

“Well, gentlemen, we had stopped, and there we hung all that night, and the next morning we were there still, a little motion under us, the very least, like the sound, so far as motion might be, of tiny ripples lapping on the beach. Everybody came haggard to breakfast. Nobody had slept, except some of the rummies who were in that condition of tissue where you might call ’em permanently asleep. The crew, such of them as I saw at intervals, seemed also to be in a state of tension. Then the questions began, fired by the broadside and popping like guerrilla warfare, always to the same tune: What was the matter? The answer reassured us briefly. It was no longer, ‘We don’t know.’ ‘Some trouble with the engine,’ we were assured. ‘The engineer’s at it now.’ So we went on eating, and fault-finding when our toast varied in brownness, and hating one another; but the day, the sulky, burning tropical day, went by, and the tropical night with its quick onrush of stars, and still we hadn’t moved. That next morning I met the wireless man at the rail, where he’s gone to lean both arms and, it seemed, throw some problem of his own at the bright horizon-line. He was a little, round, oily, dark fellow with curly hair, and in spite of his fatness his face looked funnily tragic with anxiety, as if he were going to cry. At once I felt he was pretty well shaken, and he’d tell me what’s the matter.

“‘Have you tried wireless?’ I asked, in the fatuous way we have of baiting with a commonplace when we mean to fish up something that might dart and elude us unless it thought it was snapping at the same old fly. He shook his head as if he shook me off. I’d thought he knew nothing but wireless, but it was evident he sized me up for the ass I was.

“‘Tried it?’ he said. ‘What else?’

“‘Well, don’t you get anything?’

“He shook his head again.

“‘Why don’t you keep on trying? There must be stations down here—there must be ships—’

“‘They don’t answer,’ he said. It was almost as if with

another word he might break down actually. 'I've changed my tune, and changed it—changed it. I can't get them.'

"He turned abruptly as if he were really concealing tears now, and ran up the ladder to his post. Then I went away to think. I was afraid, sheer afraid, and wondered at myself. You see, I've no more pluck than any man of my inches, but I'd been about a good bit. I'd seen adventure and heard other fellows talk it over, and I knew you're pretty sure to get out of everything with a whole skin till that last particular time when you don't—so what's the use of grizzling? But this time there was panic in my left waistcoat pocket, neatly sewed in to stay, and I knew it and hated it for being there. There was foul weather all over the ship. Nobody sang, nobody strummed the light guitar as one girl had been doing till we wished she was at home in the kitchen with a consignment of pots and pans to wash. New York hated Jerusalem more frankly than ever, and Jerusalem wagged its fat chin and openly put up its beak at New York. Hate! Talk about the wars of nations! If that ship couldn't have made use of a whole Hague conference all to herself, it wasn't because she wasn't sick for it and only needed diagnosis to have it prescribed. Toward night I climbed up to the door of the little wireless cage, and stopped there, hat in hand, if you'll believe me. I don't know what kind of besetment made me feel as if every Jack on board that ship was in as tight a place as he could breathe in, and that every lubber that spoke to them had got to walk Spanish. He looked up at me. His tired little eyes were set in a bed of wrinkles. It hadn't been long, this universal panic of the ship, but it had had time to eat into him and change him, from a fat little manipulator who'd learned to do a certain thing, to a crying, hungry soul in trouble, beseeching—maybe with no voice, only with those eyes and that quiver of a mouth—beseeching the Lord of things big and little to lift him out of the pit he's stumbled into. I don't know whether the wireless chap ever heard of the Psalmist, but if he had, I bet he was tuning his own little pipe to him that minute.

"'Go down,' said he, looking at me as if I were in pinafores.

"That was all. But I felt I must speak. I had an ass's desire to bray and a meddler's insane push to help on somehow.

I'd got to help the ship on. We all felt so. One man in the smoking-room—we kept it all of a cloud now, we smoked so hard and universally—he told me he felt as if he must get out and push, even if he drowned in doing it. He gave a queer little catch in his throat when he said it. If it had been a woman that gave that sound, you'd have said it was a sob. 'That's it,' two or three other men had said, and looked the same way, and it was ten to one that, give them a lead, they'd have sobbed, too. It was then I had lighted out. I was afraid we should all be in hysterics together like a girls' boarding-school. But the wireless man:

"'I beg pardon,' I said to him.

"'Go down,' said he.

"'I beg your pardon,' I said again, 'but mightn't there be— isn't there—some sort of magnetic field, and mightn't we be inside it?'

"He laughed a little—a shrill hoot all scorn and tiredness.

"'Magnetic grandmother!' said he. 'Go down.'

"Then I went.

"Well, whatever it was that stopped stayed stopped. Life hung fire. Electricity hadn't played us false. There were plenty of lights, as faithful as the night. It wasn't true that according to the old tune—it ran in my head all the time then—'water wouldn't quench fire, fire wouldn't burn axe,' and the rest of it. Fire was faithful and cooked us three—no, by George! six times a day the most elaborate and embroidered and sinful meals for richness the tropics ever saw. But we simply didn't move, and now the mischief was so patent, the whole thing grew so upsetting and queer, that the usual disciplinary silence cracked and broke. The captain made no secret of it. The mate made none, nor the chief engineer. He, I found out, was spending his time digging into his engine, prying into her heart to find out whether she'd got some deadly secret he hadn't shared. At last he was crying over her, the chief electrician told me afterward. But they made no secret, any of them. There was nothing the matter anywhere. The engine simply would not go. And we saw no ship and we saw no land, and wireless wouldn't talk. The only creatures on the ship that showed any animation because they hadn't time to break, were the stewards and I suppose the *chef*, though I never saw him,

and the band. For according to the notion that you can ensure a man against panic by making a noise or stuffing him, they kept the band playing the last comic-opera airs, and the stewards brought on more food, food, food, and offered it up to the god that's in every man's belly. I'll say right here that I never knew stewards so overworked as those poor devils had been from the start, and by now they were so pasty-pale it made you ashamed of yourself, if you were an able-bodied man, to ring a bell and see 'em totter out and start into that perfunctory sprightliness—you know it. See it here on this very ship; but these boys look better, a heap better. The stewards on the *Siren* made you want to say, 'For God's sake, give me the key of the pantry and I'll get it myself.'

"Well, one night, as if a great bubble burst in the air, something happened. Don't you know how it feels when your head's sort of muffled and woozy, and suddenly something clicks in your ear, and everything clears and lightens, and you find yourself out in the open? This was exactly that way. We were all on deck, packed into our rows of steamer chairs—I believe we were afraid of going below, and besides it was hot—and the band was dashing along from:

"Oh, I am the King of Gold,
And I made it all myself;
My heart and brain I sold
In accumulating pelf,'

to the Sylvia ballet music, when a man down the line of chairs somewhere—I never knew who he was—burst out into a kind of screech: 'Stop that band! For God's sake, stop that band!'

"We didn't have to. The band stopped. I believe it knew, instruments and all, that we had had every hair's weight we could endure, and that it had blared out all the breath it could spare, and had got either to scream or die dead from tiredness and fear. And then I turned my head a little—I don't know why: I felt as if I had been called—and in a veil of darkness by the rail pretty well aft I saw them, the coolie woman and the baby. 'Golden Baby!' I caught myself saying, under my breath, 'Golden Baby!'

"And at once my fear passed away from me as the shadow passes when the cloud moves on. Something snapped—that

same lightening like a bubble's breaking—and something came up in me that was like summer mornings and being young. I felt it going all over the ship, as if there'd been long breaths—what the stories call breaths of relief—and I knew I was in the midst of a flood of the same kind of sudden happiness. I had time to ask myself why, why, and to wonder a little, because the ship hadn't started and we were in exactly as bad case as before. But that I couldn't stop to think of, for my eyes were on the Golden Baby, and I seemed to be wanting to learn everything I could about him by heart, for fear I should never see him again. You know some minutes warn you they're going to be mighty short and you'd better take a snapshot of 'em while you can. The coolie woman stood there exactly as she'd stood on deck the first minute I saw her. She had on the same scanty, dignified garment down to her bare knees and thin legs, and the silver round her neck and on her arms shone out there in the dark. It seemed to shine like moonlight. The electric lights didn't touch her or the child. They were there in a darkness of their own, and it seemed as if they made their own light. The child sat on her arm and looked toward us and smiled. His hair was bright. His face was bright. Afterward I had a kind of feeling that he stretched out his arms toward us, but that I couldn't swear to. His smile was queer, too. Or, no, it wasn't queer. It was pretty much what you'd see in any baby, only more so. It wasn't—well, it wasn't benignant, you know; spiritual, you might call it, same as it is in pictures of—” He hesitated here, being, we thought, diffident about matters of accepted religion.

“Madonnas,” said the little poet, raptly. He had hung on every word.

“Exactly, Madonnas. No, it was the way you'd like to have your own baby look, if he'd come in from play with his hands full of flowers. But the coolie woman smiled. She held out her arms toward us, and him in them. And all along the line I knew women were holding out their arms toward the child; and the men—well, I guess they did what I did. I brought my feet down to the deck and sat up straight and bent forward. That's all the way I know how to express it. I wanted to get there, somewhere near the baby, and same time I knew I

mustn't go any nearer, not a step. And the only relief I had was muttering, just as you'd breathe hard, 'Golden Baby!' Then the woman spoke. It was a kind of voice—well, I don't know exactly, a cool voice, smooth, kind of like a silver horn. Something shaking in it, too, something that trembled and yet had a power of its own, a vibration—I've never been able to describe it to myself, all the times I've tried, and I'm not having any better luck now. But there wasn't any mistake about what she said. 'You're keeping him back, and he's got to be there. Oh, don't! You mustn't keep him back.'

"What language did she speak in?" asked the man that sought the parasites. He'd been listening very seriously, not in any spirit of unbelief, I could see, but with the gravity due a marvel.

The William Morris man nodded at him.

"I knew that would come," he said. "It came that very night, before we turned in. 'What language did she speak?' says the wireless man to me, and I carried the question on to the first mate. 'God, man, I don't know,' says he. 'She spoke, that's all I can say.'

"And a Frenchman that was going to write up Martinique as he saw it from the deck swore she spoke in French, and the German that played the trombone said it was the best Hanoverian German. I knew well enough it wasn't either, but I didn't know what it was, and I didn't care. I only know she spoke and we understood. I didn't have much eyesight to spare from looking at the baby; but somehow I did realize that everything round me was different, and different all over the ship. Mrs.—I forget her condemned and sacred name—she was one of your Boston Apocalypse people, the kind that got transfigured on some mount or other and haven't spoken to anybody since—why, up to now she hadn't accepted anybody's being on that boat but herself and her two long-footed daughters and their following. And now she sat there with her hand on a bedizened Jewess's fat knee, and her daughters had hold of a school-teacher from the West—not with a ten-foot pole and a hook on the end of it, mind you, but as if they were constrained to hug somebody and it didn't matter whom. It was the same all over the ship. Something had lubricated us.

Something had washed us clean. I understood, and at the same minute I knew they all understood, too. Hate had passed away, and in its place was the other word that's just as big. 'Golden Baby!' I says to myself. I saw he had done it, though I didn't know how. That didn't concern us somehow.

"The coolie woman seemed to come forward. I say seemed, though she didn't move a step, but we all knew she was nearer, every one of us, and that it wasn't important except as she brought the child. Anyhow, he seemed nearer, and if everybody felt as I did it was as if the child was warm and bright right in the midst of us. She spoke again.

"That's it,' she said. 'That's good. When you feel like this it doesn't keep him back. Don't keep him back. He's needed so.'

"And then something happened. It was so gradual and so natural that at first we didn't realize what it was, only that everything in general was all right, and the sun would rise to-morrow on the good old practical world with no fear in it, and God was up there in His heavens wishing us well and not playing tricks on us. The ship was moving, that's what it was. There was the beat of the engine and the little heaving motion of a ship that begins to feel herself, though on smooth water. Then somebody began to cry and somebody else laughed, and we hugged each other, I guess, nobody particularly anxious to know whether he was hugging out of his class or not, and somehow or other the coolie woman and the Golden Baby were gone. But that night it seemed no more incredible to have them go than it did to have them come. And the engine was beating and the wireless man suddenly appeared among us, his flabby round face all puffed out again with satisfaction in his box of tricks, and he says:

"There's a revolution in Haiti!"

"And we laughed louder and more foolishly, not because there was a revolution, but because it was such a joyful thing to have wireless say anything at all.

"Let's have something to eat,' says somebody then, because we'd got used to eating as a kind of expression of emotion of any sort; but somebody else roared out: 'Let the stewards rest, can't you? Poor devils!'

"Poor devils!' said somebody else, and then I understood,

and I guess everybody else did, that we not only impossibly loved one another, but we loved the pasty stewards, too.

“And we bunked down quietly that night, and there was no eating or drinking, only a kind of prayerful yearning over the engine that kept beating on, and thoughts we didn’t dare to put into words about the Baby. And next day the engines were still going, and there was a breeze, and in some queer way we were a quiet, happy crew of people. And everybody spoke to everybody else.”

“Where were the woman and the baby?” asked the parasite man. He was frowning a good deal and beating a forefinger silently on the table.

“I don’t know.”

“Don’t know? Didn’t you ask for them?”

“No.”

“Didn’t anybody?”

“No.”

“Why didn’t you ask?”

The William Morris man paused a long time here, and seemed to study the question in many aspects. Then he answered slowly:

“We knew we were not to ask. We knew they’d come for a special purpose. What it was didn’t concern us, and we felt—we felt a loyalty to the child, a loyalty bigger than anything I’d ever felt before. I guess it was so with all of ’em.”

“Did you ever see them again?”

“Oh, yes. We sailed north, touching at an island now and then, contented as you please, but solemn, changed in a way. I was changed. I guess they all were. I haven’t been the same man since. It was the pasty stewards on that trip that set me thinking labor and capital wasn’t an institution to be sworn over. There was something to be done about it. Well, we kept our course north, and then we slid along the coast of Haiti, and the wireless man picked up more about the revolution. Hot as pepper it was, black as ink. And then one night off that coast—I never knew whether there was a harbor or not—the engines slowed down and we stopped. But queer as it was to stop again we didn’t feel a breath of our old panic, only a solemn expectation. And we heard a stroke of oars, and before

I knew what was doing there was the coolie woman, Golden Baby in her arms, going over the side. They seemed to make their own light—the child did. His hair was bright almost like flame. His face—I never saw—”

Here he stopped a moment, as if the memory were too blinding to be borne.

“I heard a woman say—it wasn’t as if she was afraid, but only awed and wondering—‘Don’t let them go there into that island in the dark. Don’t let them go!’ And somebody else said:

“‘Hush!’

“I jumped to the rail and looked over, and I got a glimpse—I swear I did—of a boat full of blacks and the stern seat vacant for a passenger. And the boat moved away, and there was a light in it there hadn’t been before. It was bright, like the baby’s hair. We put on steam again, and that was all.”

Nobody spoke for a while, and the steward, perking out the curtains at the port-holes, to give himself pretence for lingering while our talk shut down, ventured to look at us imploringly, like a tired clock striking the hour. The parasite man began to feel his way cautiously through a sentence, evidently not knowing where he was to come out.

“It’s your theory, is it, that—that the spirit of those on board ship delayed—well, it’s absurd to say it—stopped the machinery?”

The William Morris man nodded.

“When you put in that way,” he owned, “of course there’s nothing for it but to laugh. But there were evil passions aboard that ship, envy, pride, covetousness, lust, hate—chiefly hate. Now if you should ask me if hate could stop an engine, I should say, ‘No, it can’t,’ and so would you. Still, the hate was there and the engine stopped.”

“Ah!” This was a breath in unison from us all, not a breath of understanding, but of concurrence. The scion of a noble stock, who’d been cooling off a little, got on his wobbly pins and stretched himself cautiously, with regard to equipoise.

“Look here, old chap,” said he, “I’ve heard that story before.”

The William Morris man was too much absorbed in the after-

tang of his renewed memory of it to notice who spoke, or he wouldn't have answered. Nobody answered the Sidney man.

"Not likely," said he. He spoke briefly, absently. "None of us who were there were likely to tell it. I never told it before in my life."

"But I've heard it," said the little poet.

"Have you?" asked the William Morris man. He looked up at him and spoke as if in that quarter something might be doing. "Have you?"

"Yes," said the little poet. His eyes shone. His hair seemed to bristle and come alive with some new excitement under his poll. "Oh yes, I've heard it."

"When d' you hear it?"

"Long ago—oh, long ago!"

"Who told you?"

"A man named Coleridge. He called it 'The Ancient Mariner'."