

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

KING OF THE
GOLDEN RIVER

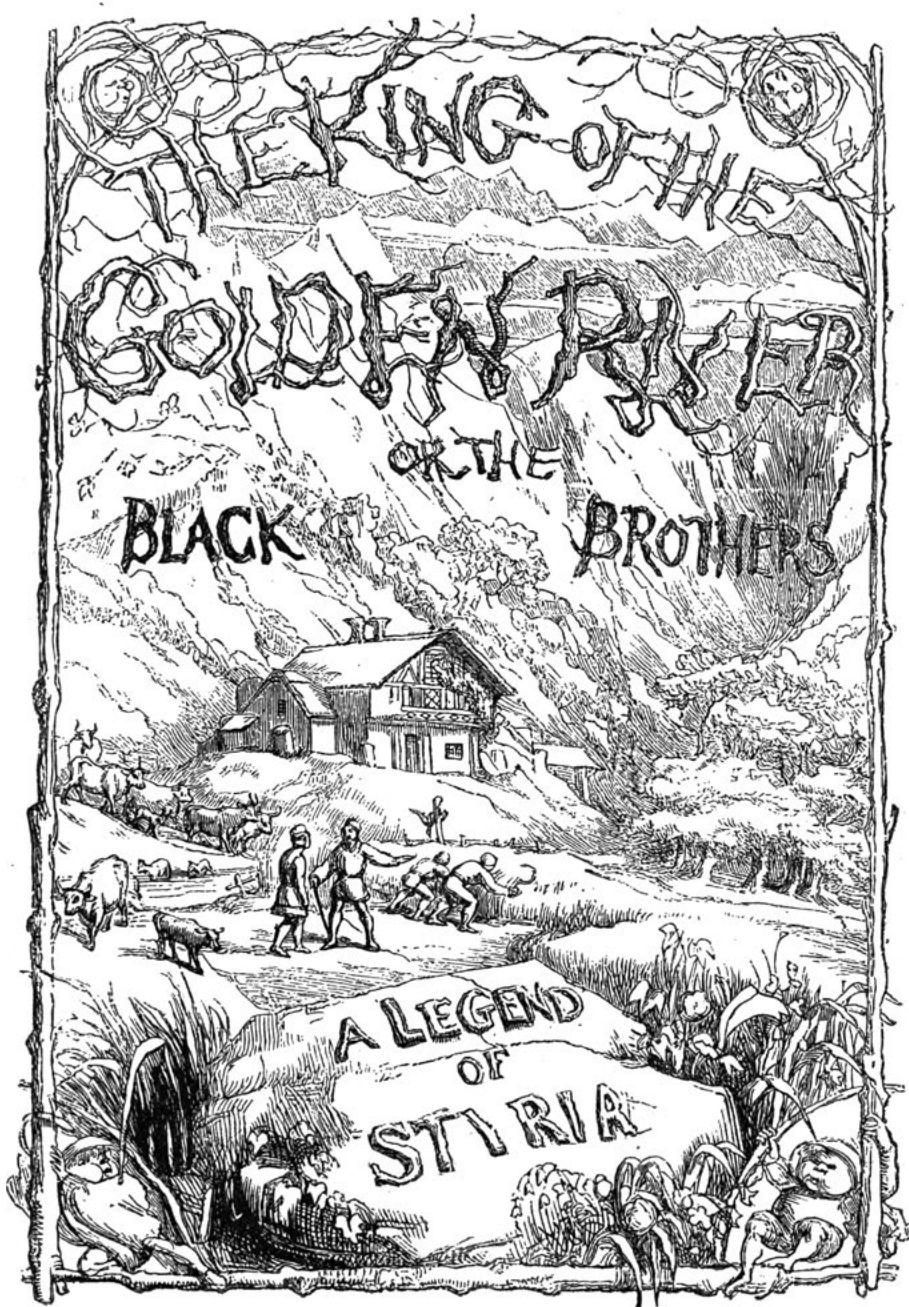
John Ruskin

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE KING OF THE
GOLDEN RIVER
OR THE
BLACK BROTHERS



A LEGEND
OF
STYRIA



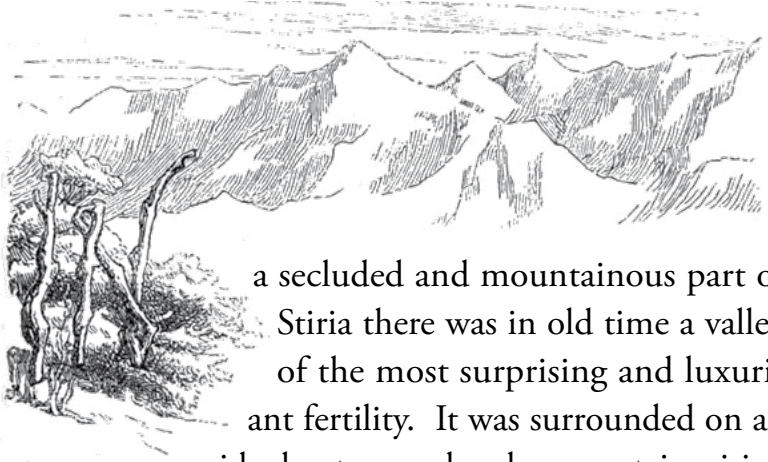
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CHAPTER I

HOW THE AGRICULTURAL SYSTEM OF THE BLACK BROTHERS WAS INTERFERED WITH BY SOUTHWEST WIND, ESQUIRE



a secluded and mountainous part of Stiria there was in old time a valley of the most surprising and luxuriant fertility. It was surrounded on all sides by steep and rocky mountains rising into peaks which were always covered with snow and from which a number of torrents descended in constant cataracts. One of these fell westward over the face of a crag so high that when the sun had set to everything else, and all below was darkness, his beams still shone full upon this waterfall, so that it looked like a shower of gold. It was therefore called by the people of the neighborhood the Golden River. It was strange that none of these streams

fell into the valley itself. They all descended on the other side of the mountains and wound away through broad plains and by populous cities. But the clouds were drawn so constantly to the snowy hills, and rested so softly in the circular hollow, that in time of drought and heat, when all the country round was burned up, there was still rain in the little valley; and its crops were so heavy, and its hay so high, and its apples so red, and its grapes so blue, and its wine so rich, and its honey so sweet, that it was a marvel to everyone who beheld it and was commonly called the Treasure Valley.

The whole of this little valley belonged to three brothers, called Schwartz, Hans, and Gluck. Schwartz and Hans, the two elder brothers, were very ugly men, with overhanging eyebrows and small, dull eyes which were always half shut, so that you couldn't see into *them* and always fancied they saw very far into *you*. They lived by farming the Treasure Valley, and very good farmers they were. They killed everything that did not pay for its eating. They shot the blackbirds because they pecked the fruit, and killed the hedgehogs lest they should suck the cows; they poisoned the crickets for eating the crumbs in the kitchen, and smothered the cicadas which used to sing all summer in the lime trees. They worked their servants without any wages till they would not work any more, and then quarreled with them and turned them out of doors without paying them. It would have been

very odd if with such a farm and such a system of farming they hadn't got very rich; and very rich they *did* get. They generally contrived to keep their corn by them till it was very dear, and then sell it for twice its value; they had heaps of gold lying about on their floors, yet it was never known that they had given so much as a penny or a crust in charity; they never went to Mass, grumbled perpetually at paying tithes, and were, in a word, of so cruel and grinding a temper as to receive from all those with whom they had any dealings the nickname of the "Black Brothers."

The youngest brother, Gluck, was as completely opposed, in both appearance and character, to his seniors as could possibly be imagined or desired. He was not above twelve years old, fair, blue-eyed, and kind in temper to every living thing. He did not, of course, agree particularly well with his brothers, or, rather, they did not agree with *him*. He was usually appointed to the honorable office of turnspit, when there was anything to roast, which was not often, for, to do the brothers justice, they were hardly less sparing upon themselves than upon other people. At other times he used to clean the shoes, floors, and sometimes the plates, occasionally getting what was left on them, by way of encouragement, and a wholesome quantity of dry blows by way of education.

Things went on in this manner for a long time. At last came a very wet summer, and everything went wrong

in the country round. The hay had hardly been got in when the haystacks were floated bodily down to the sea by an inundation; the vines were cut to pieces with the hail; the corn was all killed by a black blight. Only in the Treasure Valley, as usual, all was safe. As it had rain when there was rain nowhere else, so it had sun when there was sun nowhere else. Everybody came to buy corn at the farm and went away pouring maledictions on the Black Brothers. They asked what they liked and got it, except from the poor people, who could only beg, and several of whom were starved at their very door without the slightest regard or notice.

It was drawing towards winter, and very cold weather, when one day the two elder brothers had gone out, with their usual warning to little Gluck, who was left to mind the roast, that he was to let nobody in and give nothing out. Gluck sat down quite close to the fire, for it was raining very hard and the kitchen walls were by no means dry or comfortable-looking. He turned and turned, and the roast got nice and brown. "What a pity," thought Gluck, "my brothers never ask anybody to dinner. I'm sure, when they've got such a nice piece of mutton as this, and nobody else has got so much as a piece of dry bread, it would do their hearts good to have somebody to eat it with them."

Just as he spoke there came a double knock at the house door, yet heavy and dull, as though the knocker had been





tied up—more like a puff than a knock.

“It must be the wind,” said Gluck; “nobody else would venture to knock double knocks at our door.”

No, it wasn't the wind; there it came again very hard, and, what was particularly astounding, the knocker seemed to be in a hurry and not to be in the least afraid of the consequences. Gluck went to the window, opened it, and put his head out to see who it was.

It was the most extraordinary-looking little gentleman he had ever seen in his life. He had a very large nose, slightly brass-colored; his cheeks were very round and very red, and might have warranted a supposition that he had been blowing a refractory fire for the last eight-and-forty hours; his eyes twinkled merrily through long, silky eyelashes; his mustaches curled twice round like a corkscrew on each side of his mouth; and his hair, of a curious mixed pepper-and-salt color, descended far over his shoulders. He was about four feet six in height and wore a conical pointed cap of nearly the same altitude, decorated with a black feather some three feet long. His doublet was prolonged behind into something resembling a violent exaggeration of what is now termed a “swallow-tail,” but was much obscured by the swelling folds of an enormous black, glossy-looking cloak, which must have been very much too long in calm weather, as the wind, whistling round the old house, carried it clear out from the wearer's shoulders to about four times his own length.

Gluck was so perfectly paralyzed by the singular appearance of his visitor that he remained fixed without uttering a word, until the old gentleman, having performed another and a more energetic concerto on the knocker, turned round to look after his flyaway cloak. In so doing he caught sight of Gluck's little yellow head jammed in the window, with its mouth and eyes very wide open indeed.

"Hollo!" said the little gentleman; "that's not the way to answer the door. I'm wet; let me in."

To do the little gentleman justice, he *was* wet. His feather hung down between his legs like a beaten puppy's tail, dripping like an umbrella, and from the ends of his mustaches the water was running into his waistcoat pockets and out again like a mill stream.

"I beg pardon, sir," said Gluck, "I'm very sorry, but, I really can't."

"Can't what?" said the old gentleman.

"I can't let you in, sir—I can't, indeed; my brothers would beat me to death, sir, if I thought of such a thing. What do you want, sir?"

"Want?" said the old gentleman petulantly. "I want fire and shelter, and there's your great fire there blazing, crackling, and dancing on the walls with nobody to feel it. Let me in, I say; I only want to warm myself."

Gluck had had his head, by this time, so long out of the window that he began to feel it was really unpleasantly cold, and when he turned and saw the beautiful fire rus-

ting and roaring and throwing long, bright tongues up the chimney, as if it were licking its chops at the savory smell of the leg of mutton, his heart melted within him that it should be burning away for nothing. "He does look very wet," said little Gluck; "I'll just let him in for a quarter of an hour." Round he went to the door and opened it; and as the little gentleman walked in, there came a gust of wind through the house that made the old chimneys totter.

"That's a good boy," said the little gentleman. "Never mind your brothers. I'll talk to them."

"Pray, sir, don't do any such thing," said Gluck. "I can't let you stay till they come; they'd be the death of me."

"Dear me," said the old gentleman, "I'm very sorry to hear that. How long may I stay?"

"Only till the mutton's done, sir," replied Gluck, "and it's very brown."

Then the old gentleman walked into the kitchen and sat himself down on the hob, with the top of his cap accommodated up the chimney, for it was a great deal too high for the roof.

"You'll soon dry there, sir," said Gluck, and sat down again to turn the mutton. But the old gentleman did *not* dry there, but went on drip, drip, dripping among the cinders, and the fire fizzed and sputtered and began to look very black and uncomfortable. Never was such a cloak; every fold in it ran like a gutter.



“I beg pardon, sir,” said Gluck at length, after watching the water spreading in long, quicksilver-like streams over the floor for a quarter of an hour; “mayn’t I take your cloak?”

“No, thank you,” said the old gentleman.

“Your cap, sir?”

“I am all right, thank you,” said the old gentleman rather gruffly.

“But—sir—I’m very sorry,” said Gluck hesitatingly, “but—really, sir—you’re—putting the fire out.”

“It’ll take longer to do the mutton, then,” replied his visitor dryly.

Gluck was very much puzzled by the behavior of his guest; it was such a strange mixture of coolness and hu-



mility. He turned away at the string meditatively for another five minutes.

“That mutton looks very nice,” said the old gentleman at length. “Can’t you give me a little bit?”

“Impossible, sir,” said Gluck.

“I’m very hungry,” continued the old gentleman. “I’ve had nothing to eat yesterday nor to-day. They surely couldn’t miss a bit from the knuckle!”

He spoke in so very melancholy a tone that it quite melted Gluck’s heart. “They promised me one slice to-day, sir,” said he; “I can give you that, but not a bit more.”

“That’s a good boy,” said the old gentleman again.

Then Gluck warmed a plate and sharpened a knife. “I don’t care if I do get beaten for it,” thought he. Just as he had cut a large slice out of the mutton there came a tremendous rap at the door. The old gentleman jumped off the hob as if it had suddenly become inconveniently warm. Gluck fitted the slice into the mutton again, with desperate efforts at exactitude, and ran to open the door.

“What did you keep us waiting in the rain for?” said Schwartz, as he walked in, throwing his umbrella in Gluck’s face.

“Aye! what for, indeed, you little vagabond?” said Hans, administering an educational box on the ear as he followed his brother into the kitchen.

“Bless my soul!” said Schwartz when he opened the door.





“Amen,” said the little gentleman, who had taken his cap off and was standing in the middle of the kitchen, bowing with the utmost possible velocity.

“Who’s that?” said Schwartz, catching up a rolling-pin and turning to Gluck with a fierce frown.

“I don’t know, indeed, brother,” said Gluck in great terror.

“How did he get in?” roared Schwartz.

“My dear brother,” said Gluck deprecatingly, “he was so *very* wet!”

The rolling-pin was descending on Gluck’s head, but, at the instant, the old gentleman interposed his conical cap, on which it crashed with a shock that shook the water out of it all over the room. What was very odd, the rolling-pin no sooner touched the cap than it flew out

of Schwartz's hand, spinning like a straw in a high wind, and fell into the corner at the further end of the room.

"Who are you, sir?" demanded Schwartz, turning upon him. "What's your business?" snarled Hans.

"I'm a poor old man, sir," the little gentleman began very modestly, "and I saw your fire through the window and begged shelter for a quarter of an hour."

"Have the goodness to walk out again, then," said Schwartz. "We've quite enough water in our kitchen without making it a drying house."

"It is a cold day to turn an old man out in, sir; look at my gray hairs." They hung down to his shoulders, as I told you before.

"Aye!" said Hans; "there are enough of them to keep you warm. Walk!"

"I'm very, very hungry, sir; couldn't you spare me a bit of bread before I go?"

"Bread, indeed!" said Schwartz; "do you suppose we've nothing to do with our bread but to give it to such red-nosed fellows as you?"

"Why don't you sell your feather?" said Hans sneeringly. "Out with you!"

"A little bit," said the old gentleman.

"Be off!" said Schwartz.

"Pray, gentlemen."

"Off, and be hanged!" cried Hans, seizing him by the collar. But he had no sooner touched the old gentleman's

collar than away he went after the rolling-pin, spinning round and round till he fell into the corner on the top of it. Then Schwartz was very angry and ran at the old gentleman to turn him out; but he also had hardly touched him when away he went after Hans and the rolling-pin, and hit his head against the wall as he tumbled into the corner. And so there they lay, all three.

Then the old gentleman spun himself round with velocity in the opposite direction, continued to spin until his long cloak was all wound neatly about him, clapped his cap on his head, very much on one side (for it could not stand upright without going through the ceiling), gave an additional twist to his corkscrew mustaches, and replied with perfect coolness: "Gentlemen, I wish you a very good morning. At twelve o'clock tonight I'll call again; after such a refusal of hospitality as I have just experienced, you will not be surprised if that visit is the last I ever pay you."

"If ever I catch you here again," muttered Schwartz, coming, half frightened, out of the corner—but before he could finish his sentence the old gentleman had shut the house door behind him with a great bang, and there drove past the window at the same instant a wreath of ragged cloud that whirled and rolled away down the valley in all manner of shapes, turning over and over in the air and melting away at last in a gush of rain.

"A very pretty business, indeed, Mr. Gluck!" said

Schwartz. "Dish the mutton, sir. If ever I catch you at such a trick again—bless me, why, the mutton's been cut!"

"You promised me one slice, brother, you know," said Gluck.

"Oh! and you were cutting it hot, I suppose, and going to catch all the gravy. It'll be long before I promise you such a thing again. Leave the room, sir; and have the kindness to wait in the coal cellar till I call you."



Gluck left the room melancholy enough. The brothers ate as much mutton as they could, locked the rest in the cupboard, and proceeded to get very drunk after dinner.

Such a night as it was! Howling wind and rushing rain, without intermission. The brothers had just sense enough left to put up all the shutters and double-bar the door before they went to bed. They usually slept in the same room. As the clock struck twelve they were both



awakened by a tremendous crash. Their door burst open with a violence that shook the house from top to bottom.

“What’s that?” cried Schwartz, starting up in his bed.

“Only I,” said the little gentleman.

The two brothers sat up on their bolster and stared into the darkness. The room was full of water, and by a misty moonbeam, which found its way through a hole in the shutter, they could see in the midst of it an enormous foam globe, spinning round and bobbing up and down like a cork, on which, as on a most luxurious cushion, reclined the little old gentleman, cap and all. There was plenty of room for it now, for the roof was off.

“Sorry to incommode you,” said their visitor ironically. “I’m afraid your beds are dampish. Perhaps you had better go to your brother’s room; I’ve left the ceiling on there.”

They required no second admonition, but rushed into Gluck’s room, wet through and in an agony of terror.

“You’ll find my card on the kitchen table,” the old gentleman called after them. “Remember, the *last* visit.”

“Pray Heaven it may!” said Schwartz, shuddering. And the foam globe disappeared.

Dawn came at last, and the two brothers looked out of Gluck’s little window in the morning. The Treasure Valley was one mass of ruin and desolation. The inundation had swept away trees, crops, and cattle, and left in their stead a waste of red sand and gray mud. The two brothers crept shivering and horror-struck into the



kitchen. The water had gutted the whole first floor; corn, money, almost every movable thing, had been swept away, and there was left only a small white card on the kitchen table. On it, in large, breezy, long-legged letters, were engraved the words:

