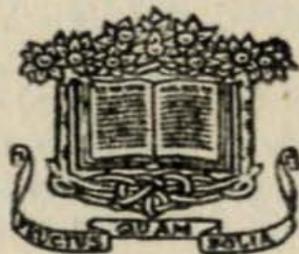


The Blossoming Rod

by

Mary Stewart Cutting



Frontispiece

A. L. Burt Company
Publishers *New York*



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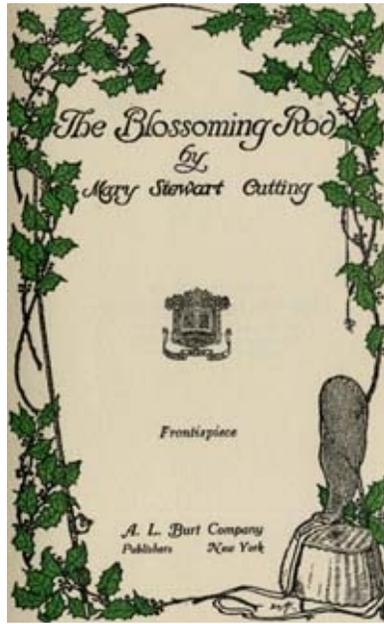
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He was out in the backyard ... flapping that rod in circles



The Blossoming Rod

by

Mary Stewart Cutting

A.L. Burt Company
Publishers New York

Doubleday, Page & Company



The Blossoming Rod

Mr. Langshaw had vaguely felt unusual preparations for a Christmas gift to him this year; he was always being asked for "change" to pay the children for services rendered.

It might have seemed a pity that calculation as to dollars and cents entered so much into the Christmas festivities of the family, if it were not that it entered so largely into the scheme of living that it was naturally interwoven with every dearest hope and fancy; the overcoming of its limitations gave a zest to life. Langshaw himself, stopping now, as was his daily habit, to look at the display made by the sporting-goods shop on his way home the Friday afternoon before Christmas Monday, wondered, as his hand touched the ten-dollar bill in his pocket—a debt unexpectedly paid him that day—if the time had actually arrived at last when he might become the possessor of the trout-rod that stood in the corner of the window; reduced, as the ticket proclaimed, from fifteen dollars to ten.

The inspiration was the more welcome because the moment before his mind had been idly yet disquietingly filled with the shortcomings of George, his eldest child, and only son, aged ten, who didn't seem to show that sense of responsibility which his position and advanced years called for—even evading his duties to his fond mother when he should be constituting himself her protector. He was worried as to the way George would turn out when he grew up.

This particular trout-rod, however, had an attraction for Langshaw of long standing. He had examined it carefully more than once when in the shop with his neighbour, Wickersham; it wasn't a fifty-dollar rod, of course, but it seemed in some ways as good as if it were—it was expensive enough for him! He had spoken of it once to his wife, with a craving for her usual sympathy, only to meet with a surprise that seemed carelessly disapproving.

"Why, you have that old one of your father's and the bass-rod already; I can't see why you should want another. You always say you can't get off to go fishing as it is."

He couldn't explain that to have this particular split bamboo would be almost as good as going on a fishing trip; with it in his hand he could feel himself between green meadows, the line swirling down the rushing brook. But later Clytie had gone back to the subject with pondering consideration.

"Ten dollars seems an awful price for a rod! I'm sure I could buy the same thing for much less uptown; wouldn't you like me to see about it some day?"

"Great Scott! Never think of such a thing!" he had replied in horror. "I could get much cheaper ones myself! If I ever have the money I'll do the buying—you hear?"

"—Hello, Langshaw! Looking at that rod again? Why don't you blow yourself to a Christmas present? Haven't you got the nerve?"

"That's what I don't know!" called Langshaw with a wave of the hand as Wickersham passed by. Yet, even as he spoke he felt he did know—his mind was joyously, adventurously made up to have "the nerve"; he had a right, for once in the twelve years of his married life, to buy himself a Christmas present that he

really wanted, in distinction to the gift that family affection prompted, and held dear as such, but which had no relation to his needs or desires. Children and friends were provided for; his wife's winter suit—a present by her transforming imagination—already in the house; the Christmas turkey for the janitor of the children's school subscribed to—sometimes he had wished himself the janitor!—and all the small demands that drain the purse at the festal season carefully counted up and allowed for. There was no lien on this unexpected sum just received. The reel and the line, and the flies and such, would have to wait until another time, to be sure; but no one could realize what it would be to him to come home and find that blessed rod there. He had a wild impulse to go in and buy it that moment, but such haste seemed too slighting to the dignity of that occasion, which should allow the sweets of anticipation—though no one knew better than he the danger of delay where money was concerned: it melted like snow in the pocket. Extra funds always seemed to bring an extra demand.

The last time there was ten dollars to spare there had been a letter from Langshaw's mother, saying that his sister Ella, whose husband was unfortunately out of a position, had developed flat-foot; and a pair of suitable shoes, costing nine-fifty, had been prescribed by the physician. Was it possible for her dear boy to send the money? Ella was so depressed.

The ten dollars had, of course, gone to Ella. Both Langshaw and his wife had an unsympathetic feeling that if they developed flat-foot now they would have to go without appropriate shoes.

"You look quite gay!" said his wife as she greeted him on his return, her pretty oval face, with its large dark eyes and dark curly locks, held up to be kissed. "Has anything nice happened?"

"You look gay, too!" he evaded laughingly, as his arms lingered round her. Clytie was always a satisfactory person for a wife. "What's this pink stuff on your hair—popcorn?"

"Oh, goodness! Baby has been so bad, she has been throwing it round everywhere," she answered, running ahead of him upstairs to a room that presented a scene of brilliant disorder.

On the bed was a large box of tinselled Christmas-tree decorations and another of pink-and-white popcorn—the flotsam and jetsam of which strewed the counterpane and the floor to its farthest corners, mingled with scraps of glittering paper, an acreage of which surrounded a table in the centre of the room that was adorned with mucilage pot and scissors. A large feathered hat, a blue silk dress, and a flowered skirt were on the rug, near which a very plump child of three, with straggling yellow hair, was trying to get a piece of gilt paper off her shoe. She looked up with roguish blue eyes to say rapidly:

"Fardie doesn't know what baby goin' agive 'm for Kissemus!"

"Hello! This looks like the real thing," said Langshaw, stepping over the débris; "but what are all these clothes on the floor for?"

"Oh, Mary was dressing up and just dropped those things when she went to the village with Viney, though I called her twice to come back and pick them up," said the mother, sweeping the garments out of the way. "It's so tiresome of her! Oh, I know you stand up for everything Mary does, Joe Langshaw; but she is the hardest child to manage!"

Her tone insensibly conveyed a pride in the difficulty of dealing with her elder daughter, aged six.

"But did you ever see anything like Baby? She can keep a secret as well as any one! It does look Christmasy, though—doesn't it? Of course all the work of the tree at the mission comes on me as usual. The children, with the two Wickersham girls, were helping me until they got tired. Why don't you come and kiss father, Baby? She is going to sweep up the floor with her little broom so that father will give her five cents."

"I don't want to sweep 'e floor!" said the child, snapping her blue eyes.

"She shall get her little broom and Fardie will help her," said Langshaw, catching the child up in his arms and holding the round little form closely to him before putting her down carefully on her stubby feet.

Later, when the game of clearing up was over and the nickel clutched in Baby's fat palm, he turned to his wife with a half-frown:

"Don't you think you are making the children rather mercenary, Clytie? They seem to want to be paid for everything they do. I'm just about drained out of change!"

"Oh, at Christmas!" said the wife expressively.

"Well, I hope nobody is going to spend any money on me; the only presents I want are those you make for me," said Langshaw warningly. He gave the same warning each year, undeterred by the nature of the articles produced. His last year's "Christmas" from Clytie had been a pair of diaphanous blue China-silk pyjamas that were abnormally large in chest and sleeves—as for one of giant proportions—and correspondingly contracted in the legs, owing to her cutting out the tops first and having to get the other necessary adjuncts out of the scant remainder of the material. "You hear me, Clytie?"

"Yes, I hear," returned Clytie in a bored tone.

"Do you know—" Langshaw hesitated, a boyish smile overspreading his countenance. "I was looking at that trout-rod in Burchell's window to-day. I don't suppose you remember my speaking of it, but I've had my eye on it for a long time." He paused, expectant of encouraging interest.

"Oh, have you, dear?" said Clytie absently. The room was gradually, under her fingers, resuming its normal appearance. She turned suddenly with a vividly animated expression.

"I must tell you that you're going to get a great surprise tonight—it isn't a Christmas present, but it's something that you'll like even better, I know. It's about something that George has been doing. You'll never guess what it is!"

"Is that so?" said Langshaw absently in his turn. He had a momentary sense of being set back in his impulse to confidences that was not, after all, untinged with pleasure. His delightful secret was still his own, unmarred by unresponsive criticism. "By the way, Clytie, I don't like the way George has been behaving lately. He hasn't shown me his report from school in months; whenever I ask him for it he has some excuse. Hello! Is that little Mary crying?"

"I wonder what on earth has happened now!" exclaimed the mother, rushing from the room, to return the next instant, pulling after her a red-cloaked and red-hatted little girl who sought to hide behind her.

"Well, what do you think she's done?" Clytie's tone was withering as she haled forth the shrinking culprit,

her small hands over her eyes. "She lost her purse with the dollar she had saved up for your Christmas present—lost the money for dear father's present; and all because she took it with her to buy a five-cent pencil—a green pencil with purple glass in the end of it; to buy something for *herself* before Christmas!" Clytie paused tragically. "Of course, if she hadn't taken her money out to spend it on herself she wouldn't have lost it!"

"I don't care!" burst out the culprit, her big dark eyes, just like her mother's, flashing from under her brown curls, and her red lips set defiantly. "It was my own money, anyhow, if I did lose it. I earned it all myself. It wasn't yours!"

"Oh! Oh! Oh!" interposed the father in gentle reproof. "Little girls mustn't talk like that to dear mother. Come, get up here on father's knee—so." He took off the red cap, tucked the brown curly head in the bend of his arm, his chin resting on the top of it as he went on, with the child's small hands clutching at his. "Mary must always do what mother says; but, so far as this money is concerned, you can make me something that I would like far better than anything you could buy. Why don't you make me another pincushion, for instance? The one you gave me last year is quite worn out."

"A pink one?" asked Mary faintly.

"Yes. What's the matter now?" The child had suddenly wriggled to a kneeling posture in his hold and had her little strangling arms round his neck in a tempest of sobs.

"I don't want to give you a pi-ink pincushion—I don't want to! I want my dollar! I want my dollar—to spend! I want—Father, I want my dollar—my do-o-ol-lar! I want my—"

"What did I tell you, Mary Langshaw?" cried Clytie. She appealed to her husband. "It's just the way I knew she'd act. Now I suppose you'll have to give it to her. Mary, be still a moment—her head is so hot!"

"There, there!" said Langshaw soothingly. "She shall have her money this minute."

"Of course she doesn't deserve it," said Clytie, but with a tone of relief in her voice that seemed oddly greater than the occasion warranted. Mary had wound herself round him passionately; her sobs were dying away happily in long, deep breaths at intervals. Baby, being undressed on her mother's lap, was laughing over some pieces of gilt paper. In the heart of this domesticity it was as if the father and mother were embarked with this little company on a full and swelling river of love, of which they felt the exquisite soothing ripples.

Langshaw put his hand into his pocket.

"No, I can't give you the dollar this minute, little girl; father has only a ten-dollar bill. I'll get it changed right after dinner. Isn't dinner 'most ready, Clytie?"

"We'll go down just as soon as I get Baby in bed," said the mother peacefully. "I don't see why George isn't here. Goodness! There he is now," she added as a tremendous slam of the front door announced the fact. The next moment a small boy, roguishly blue-eyed and yellow-haired like Baby, with an extremely dirty face and a gray sweater half covered with mud, hurled himself into the room, surreptitiously tickling one of Baby's bare feet and pulling Mary's curls on his way to greet his father.

"What have you been doing to get so dirty?"

"Playing cops and robbers," said the boy, serenely. His dimples appeared suddenly; his eyes lit up. "Say, mother"—he turned to her irresolutely—"shall I tell father now?"

"Not until after dinner," returned the mother inexorably. "Go and make yourself clean!"

"May I put on my white silk tie?" George's white tie was the banner of festivity.

"Yes."

"You rouse my curiosity. This seems to be a great occasion," said Langshaw.

"Oh, it is!" agreed the mother happily. She murmured in his ear as they went downstairs: "I hope you'll show that you're pleased, dear. You know sometimes when you really are pleased you don't show it at once—and George has been trying so hard. If you'll only show that you're pleased—"

"Yes—all right!" returned the husband a little impatiently. Clytie had a sensitive consideration for her son's feelings which struck him at times as exaggerated. He thought of the delightful secret back in his own mind; there was no reason for talking any more about the rod until he bought it; he would manage to replace the dollar abstracted from the reserve fund.

If he gave absent answers during the meal Clytie seemed to be preoccupied also. Little Mary, who sat by him, tucked her hand into his as she prattled.

"Now, George!" said his mother at last suddenly when the rice pudding had been finished. George rose, clean and red-cheeked, looking more than ever like a large edition of Baby, in spite of his jacket and knickerbockers, as he stepped over to his father with a new dignity and handed him a folded sheet of paper.

"What's this?" asked Langshaw genially opening it. He read aloud the words within, written laboriously in a round, boyish hand:

To George Brander Langshaw, from father.

You Oh me five dolars.

Reseived paiment.

"Hello! Hello! What does this mean?" asked Langshaw slowly, with an unpleasant startled sensation that any such sum in connection with George was out of all reason.

"It means a bill for you from me!" announced George. His cheeks grew redder, his blue eyes looked squarely at his father. "It's for this!" He pulled from his pocket a school report card divided into tiny ruled squares, filled with figures for half its length, and flung it down proudly on the table before his parent.

"It's the Department—since September. You said when Miss Skinner sent that last note home about me that if I could get a hundred in Department for every month up to Christmas you'd be willing to pay me five dollars. You can see there for yourself, father, the three one hundreds—no, not that line—that's only fifty-five for spelling; nobody ever knows their spelling! Here is the place to look—in the Department column.

"I've tried awful hard to be good, father, to surprise you."

"The way that child has tried!" burst forth Clytie, her dark eyes drowned in sparkles. "And they're so unfair at school—giving you a mark if you squeak your chair, or speak, or look at anybody; as if any child could be expected to sit like a stone all the time! I'm sure I love to hear children laughing—and you know yourself how hard it is for George to be quiet! We had a little talk about it together, he and I; and now you see! It's been such work keeping his card from you each month when you asked for it. One day he thought he had a bad mark and he couldn't eat any dinner—you thought he was ill; but he went to Miss Skinner the next day and she took it off because he had been trying so hard to be good. Joe, why don't you speak?"

"George, I'm proud of you!" said Langshaw simply. There was a slight huskiness in his voice; the round face and guileless blue eyes of his little boy, who had tried "awful hard to be good," seemed to have acquired a new dignity. The father saw in him the grown-up son who could be depended upon to look after his mother if need were. Langshaw held out his hand as man to man; the two pairs of eyes met squarely. "Nothing you could have done would have pleased me more than this, George. I value it more than any Christmas present I could have."

"Mother said you'd like it," said the beaming George, ducking his head suddenly and kicking out his legs from behind.

"And you'll pay the five dollars?" supplemented Clytie anxiously.

"Surely!" said Langshaw. The glances of the parents met in one of the highest pleasures that life affords: the approval together of the good action of their dear child. "George can go out and get this ten-dollar bill changed."

"If you can't spare it, father—" suggested the boy with some new sense of manliness, hanging back.

"I'm glad to be able to spare it," said the father soberly. "It's a good deal of money," he added. "I suppose, of course, you'll put it in the bank, George?"

"Now you mustn't ask what he's going to do with it," said Clytie.

"Oh, isn't it much!" cried little Mary.

"Dear me, there's the doorbell," said Clytie. "Who can it be at this hour? Run, George, and see!"

"It's a letter for you, mother," announced George, reappearing. "There's a man in the hall, waiting for an answer."

"It looks like a bill," said Clytie nervously, tearing open the envelope; "but I don't owe any bill. Why, it's two and a quarter, from the tailor, for fixing over my old suit last fall! I'm positive I paid it weeks ago. There's some mistake."

"He says he's been here three times, but you were out."

"Have you any money for it, Clytie?" asked her husband.

Clytie looked as if a thunderbolt had struck her.

"Yes, I have; but—oh, I don't want to take it for that! I need every penny I've got."

"Well, there's no need of feeling so badly about it," said Langshaw resignedly.

"Give the ten-dollar bill to the man, George, and see if he can change it." He couldn't resist a slight masculine touch of severity at her incapacity. "I wish you'd tend to these things at the time, Clytie, or let me know about them." He took the money when George returned. "Here's your dollar now, Mary—don't lose it again!—and your five, George. You might as well take another dollar yourself, Clytie, for extras."

He pocketed the remainder of the change carelessly. After his first pang at the encroachment on the reserve fund the rod had sunk so far out of sight that it was almost as if it had never been. He had, of course, known all along that he would not buy it. Even the sting of the "Amount due" quickly evaporated.

Little Mary gave a jump that bumped her brown curly head against him.

"You don't know what I'm going to give you for Christmas!" she cried joyously.

II

Langshaw was one of those men who have an inherited capacity for enjoying Christmas. He lent it his attention with zest, choosing the turkey himself with critical care as he went through the big market in town, from whence he brought also wreaths and branches of holly that seemed to have larger and redder berries than could be bought in the village. On Christmas Eve he put up the greens that decorated the parlour and dining-room—a ceremony that required large preparations with a step-ladder, a hammer, tacks, and string, the removal of his coat, and a lighted pipe in one corner of his mouth; and which proceeded with such painstaking slowness on account of his coming down from the ladder every other moment to view the artistic effect of the arrangements, that it was only by sticking the last branches up any old way at Clytie's wild appeal that he ever got it finished at all.

Then he helped her fill the stockings, his own fingers carefully giving the crowning effect of orange and cornucopia in each one, and arranging the large packages below, after tiptoeing down the stairs with them so as not to wake the officially sleeping children, who were patently stark awake, thrashing or coughing in their little beds. The sturdy George had never been known to sleep on Christmas Eve, always coming down the next day esthetically pale and with abnormally large eyes, to the feast of rapture.

On this Saturday—Christmas Eve's eve—when Langshaw finally reached home, laden with all the "last things" and the impossible packages of tortuous shapes left by fond relatives at his office for the children—one pocket of his overcoat weighted with the love-box of really good candy for Clytie—it was evident as soon as he opened the hall door that something unusual was going on upstairs. Wild shrieks of "It's father! It's father!" rent the air.

"It's father!"

"Fardie! Fardie, don't come up!"

"Father, don't come up!"

"Father, it's your present!"

There was hasty scurrying of feet, racing to and fro, and further shrieks. Langshaw waited, smiling.

It was evidently a "boughten" gift, then; the last had been a water pitcher, much needed in the household. He braced himself fondly for immense enthusiasm over this.

An expression of intense excitement was visible on each face when finally he was allowed to enter the upper room. Mary and Baby rushed at him to clasp his leg, while his wife leaned over to kiss him as he whispered:

"I brought out a lot of truck; it's all in the closet in the hall."

George, standing with his hands in his pockets, proclaimed loudly, with sparkling eyes:

"You nearly saw your present! It's from mother and us. Come here, Baby, and pull brother's leg. Say,

father, do you like cut glass?"

"O-oh!" came in ecstatic chorus from the other two, as at a delightful joke.

"It's a secret!" announced Baby, her yellow hair falling over one round, blue eye.

"I believe it's a pony," said the father. "I'm sure I heard a pony up here!"

Shouts of renewed joy greeted the jest.

All the next day, Christmas Eve itself, whenever two or three of the family were gathered together there were secret whisperings, more scurrings, and frenzied warnings for the father not to come into the room. In spite of himself, Langshaw began to get a little curious as to the tobacco jar or the fire shovel, or whatever should be his portion. He not only felt resigned to not having the trout-rod, but a sort of wonder also rose in him that he had been bewitched—even momentarily—into thinking he could have it. What did it matter anyway?

"It's worth it, old girl, isn't it?" he said cryptically as he and Clytie met once unexpectedly in the hall, and he put his arm round her.

"Yes!" answered his wife, her dark eyes lustrous. Sometimes she didn't look much older than little Mary. "One thing, though, I must say: I do hope, dear, that—the children have been thinking so much of our present to you and saving up so for it—I do hope, Joe, that if you are pleased you'll show it. So far as I'm concerned, it doesn't matter; but sometimes—when, of course, I know how pleased you really are—you don't show it at once to others. That's why I hope you'll show it to-morrow if—"

"Great Scott! Clytie, let up on it! What do you want me to do—jump up and down and make a fool of myself?" asked her husband scornfully. "You leave me alone!"

It was Langshaw's firm rule, vainly protested even by his wife, that the household should have breakfast on Christmas Day before tackling the stockings—a hurried mockery of a meal, to be sure, yet to his masculine idea a reënforcement of food for the infant stomach before the long, hurtling joy of the day. The stockings and the piles under them were taken in order, according to age—the youngest first and the others waiting in rapt interest and admiration until their turn arrived—a pretty ceremony.

In the delicious revelry of Baby's joy, as her trembling, fat little fingers pulled forth dolls and their like, all else was forgotten until it was Mary's turn, and then George's, and then the mother's. And then, when he had forgotten all about it: "Now father!" There was seemingly a breathless moment while all eyes turned to him.

"It's father's turn now; father's going to have his presents. Father, sit down here on the sofa—it's your turn now."

There were only a blue cornucopia and an orange and a bottle of olives in his stocking, a Christmas card from his sister Ella, a necktie from grandmamma, and nothing, as his quick eye had noted, under it on the floor; but now George importantly stooped down, drew a narrow package from under the sofa and laid it beside his father, pulling off the paper. Inside was a slim, longish, gray linen bag. Langshaw studied it for a moment before opening it.

"Well, I'll be jiggered!" he breathed, with a strange glance round at the waiting group and an odd, crooked smile. "I'll be jiggered!"

There in its neatly grooved sections lay the rod, ready to be put together—not a rod, but, as his eye almost unbelievably reassured him, *the* rod—the ticket of the shop adorning it—in all its beauty of golden shellac and delicate tip. His fingers touched the pieces reverently.

"Well, will you look at that! How did you ever think of getting it?"

"How did I think of it? Because you talked about it all the time," said his wife scornfully, with her arms round his neck from behind, while the children flung themselves upon him. "Oh, I know you thought you didn't; but you did just the same. George heard you, too. We got Mr. Wickersham to pick it out. He said it was the one you wanted. And the reel—you haven't noticed that box there—the reel is the right kind, he says; and the line is silk—the best. There's the book of flies too—six. Baby's crazy over them! Mr. Wickersham said it was all just what you ought to have. We've been saving up for the longest time; but we had to wait, you see, for George's deoprtment before the things could be bought. If it isn't right—"

"Right? Say, this is the finest present I ever had!" said Langshaw with glittering eyes and that little crooked smile. "It just beats everything!"

He rose, scattering his adoring family, and, walking to the window, threw it open to the frosty December air and called across to a neighbour standing on the walk.

"Want to come over here, Hendon? Got something to show you. Will you look at this! Present from my wife and the kids—been saving up for it. It's a peach, I'll tell you that! I'm going to take George off fishing this spring—What? Well, come over later, when you've got time to take a good look at it."

"Do you like it, father?" came from three different voices at once.

"Do I like it? You can just bet I do," said Langshaw emphatically. He bent and kissed the three upturned faces, and leaned toward his wife afterward to press her sweet waiting lips with his; but his eyes, as if drawn by a magnet, were only on the rod—not the mere bundle of sticks he might have bought, but transformed into one blossoming with love.

"And do you know, we hardly saw a thing of him all day!" Clytie proudly recounted afterward to her sister. "My dear, he would hardly take time to eat his dinner or speak to any one; he was out in the back yard with Henry Wickersham and Mr. Hendon until dark, flapping that rod in circles—the silliest thing! He nearly sent a hook into George's eye once. George acted as bewitched as he did. Joe kept telling every single person who came along that it was 'a present from his wife and the kids.' He certainly showed that he was pleased."

"It's been a pretty nice day, hasn't it?" Langshaw said to his wife that Christmas night when the children were at last in bed. "Best Christmas I ever had! To think of you and the kids doing all this for me."

His hand rested lovingly on the rod, now once again swathed in the gray linen bag. He would have been the last to realize that, in his humble way, he typified a diviner Fatherhood to the little family who trusted in his care for them—for all things came of him, and of his own had they given him.

END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE BLOSSOMING ROD

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