






**WHEN FAIRIES WERE
FRIENDLY**



STORIES BY
EVALEEN STEIN

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“VERY BIG AND AWKWARD HE LOOKED KNEELING THERE
BEFORE THE LITTLE LADY”

When Fairies Were Friendly

BY

Evaleen Stein

Author of "A Little Shepherd of Provence,"
"Gabriel and the Hour Book," "The Christ-
mas Porringer," "The Little Count of
Normandy," "Our Little Crusader
Cousin of Long Ago," etc.

Illustrated by **Thelma Gooch**



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To
MY MOTHER

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THE BABE IN THE MANGER

When Fairies Were Friendly

THE BABE IN THE MANGER



OVER an old city of Europe—never mind which—the Christmas-eve stars were twinkling faintly as the north wind drove the gathering clouds across the sky. Soon the snow began to fall, drifting whitely over the steep brown roofs of the ancient houses and covering the cobble-stones of the winding streets with a soft fleece. In the

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midst of the city rose a great cathedral, where the shining flakes touched lightly the stone fruits and flowers wreathing the beautiful portal, and tufted the wings of the marble angels carved above it till they seemed all plumed and feathery for flight.

Within the gray walls, here and there before some shrine, a few worshippers knelt; or a tall candle shone with a twinkling flame, as if the stars, blotted out of the sky, were coming down to shine on earth. But though these little, golden flames lighted a small space about them, the echoing aisles and high vaulted roof were still dim and shadowy, for it was not yet time for the

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midnight mass when hundreds more of the tall white candles would blaze out in honor of the Christ-child's birthday.

Indeed, everything was ready and waiting for the holy hour. Green Christmas garlands wound the fluted pillars and decked the walls between the lovely stained windows, and twined about the altar where a wonderful little scene,—or “creche,” as it was called,—had been made in memory of the place in Bethlehem where the little Jesus was born. There at the back were the stalls where one might see the heads of the ox and the ass, carved from wood and painted to resemble life; while directly in front was the manger

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lined, like a pretty nest, with soft hay and golden straw, and in it lay the image of the blessed Christ-child, wrapped in swaddling clothes of white linen and with a halo of pure gold about his soft curls. At the head of the manger was a waxen figure of Mother Mary in a robe of heavenly blue, her hands clasped and her sweet eyes gazing lovingly into the face of her little Son. Near her stood Saint Joseph, and in front of the manger knelt the shepherds who had come to worship the newborn Babe, their crooks in their hands and their shaggy brown cloaks looking very rough beside the splendid mantles of the three wise kings. These were kneeling also, the aged

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Gaspar, with his long silvery beard, Melchior, strong and thoughtful, and Balthazzar, young and handsome, all sparkling with jewels and cloth of gold. Their heads were bare, for their precious crowns lay before the manger of the little Jesus, to whom they offered also their gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. Over all hung a golden star which would shine and sparkle when the many tall candles were lighted, and round about hovered waxen angels in robes of purest white.

Everything was very still and beautiful, ready for the coming of the holy midnight. The star waited to twinkle, the candles to flash into golden flame, the white-robed an-

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gels seemed impatient to break into joyous song, and the shepherds and kings to bow lower still before the little Jesus. And high up in the cathedral tower the chime of bells waited also to ring out their gold and silver notes.

While all these things were thus hushed expectantly, now and again some worshipper entered through the beautiful open portal; and presently, all alone, there slipped in a little girl. A ragged shawl partly covered her head and her thin little figure, and she clasped in her arms a bundle wrapped in a tattered quilt. If you had lifted the corner of this, you would have seen the wan face of a baby, its tiny cheeks pale and

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sunken and its little lips blue with cold; for both shawl and quilt were thickly powdered with snowflakes.

The little girl looked timidly about her, and then slowly drawing near the altar where stood the creche, sank down on the stone floor to rest.

Who was she, and where did she come from? Listen, and I will tell you. She was called Margot; I do not know her other name, but that does not matter. In the poorest part of the city was the little hovel that had been her home. Her father had been dead since early summer, and for more than a week now her mother had been lying ill with a burning fever, so that she did not

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know how cold was their one room. Margot had been forced to use almost the last bit of firewood to keep herself and little brother from freezing in the bitter cold. Nor did the poor mother know that only a crust of bread and a few drops of milk were left in the bare cupboard. Her eyes were very bright and her cheeks flushed, but that was because of the fever which made her talk at times so strangely that Margot was frightened; but at last, on Christmas eve, she had come to herself for a little while, though so pale and weak she could scarcely call the little girl to her bedside.

When the child came to her, she whispered faintly, stopping often to

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gather her fluttering breath, that she was going to their father, and that Margot must take little brother and seek out the God's House for children; for so was called the home where poor orphans were cared for in the old city. Then the mother's eyes closed and she lay so white and still that Margot knew it was useless to try to waken her; for thus her father had lain, and all her tears had not aroused him.

Nevertheless, bending over the still face on the pillow, poor little Margot began to cry bitterly. But she was a brave child and, sad and forlorn though she was, soon she tried to dry her tears and to obey her mother's last words. In truth, she

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knew she must find help somewhere, for there were only gray ashes on the hearth and no longer was there even a crust on the cupboard shelf. So wrapping little brother in the old quilt, she took him in her arms, and putting the ragged shawl around her she tried to cover them both in its scanty folds. Then for the last time kissing her mother's cold forehead she set out to find the children's God's House. Why did not their neighbors help? Well, that was because all those dwelling in that part of the city were almost as poor and miserable as the family of Margot, and child though she was, she shrank from asking aid from them.

So, shivering and sorrowful, she

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had stumbled out into the darkness while the black clouds were driving across the sky and the snow beginning to fall. On and on the little girl wandered, for soon she lost her way. Colder and wearier and weaker she grew with every step; and though poor little brother lay very quietly, his eyes closed in a kind of stupor from cold and hunger, his thin, tiny body seemed a leaden weight in her tired arms. At last, when almost ready to faint, she had come to the cathedral, and seeing the open door and the lights within, had slipped in, as I have told you; and there she was, sunk on the floor before the altar.

Presently, when she had rested a

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little, she lifted her eyes to the wonderful creche. Though only the few candles lighted it, the more she stared at it the more wonderful it seemed to her. She had never before been in the cathedral in the evening; and while at the few Christmas times she could remember, once or twice she had seen the creche by day, never had she ventured so close to it. Perhaps it was the dim light that had made her dare to do so now. As she looked long and intently at the worshipping figures clustering around the little Jesus, slowly Margot's dark eyes grew deeper and dreamier, and her face filled with a strange light. More and more real it all became to her; Mother Mary,

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with her sweet loving face, seemed to breathe and smile, and so also did the white-winged angels; even the three kings, in their splendid mantles and gold and jewels, did not over-awe her, but everyone seemed so beautiful and kind and gentle. Then her gaze rested on the manger in the midst of all. From her place on the floor she could not see the Christ-child as he lay within it, but only the rim of his golden halo that shone amid the soft hay that brimmed around him as he nestled there.

Just then little brother slipped from her knees to the stone floor. As she stooped and gathered him in her arms and his tiny cold

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hands lay against her own, a thought came to her, filling her eyes still deeper with dreams. "Oh," she said to herself, "if only I could tuck him in the manger of the little Jesus,—it is so soft and warm,—surely, surely the dear Christ-child would not be angry,—the manger has plenty of room, and little brother is so small!" The more she gazed at the overflowing hay, the more she wished that he might lie there, if only for a little while till he grew warm and she could rest; the stone floor was so cold, and her arms were so tired. Surely, she thought, Mother Mary would not forbid her, she looked so loving and compassionate; and the white-winged an-

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gels, had they not all come down from the sky? So perhaps they would pity little brother and would take him with them when they flew back to heaven where everything was bright and happy.

Now, at any other time, Margot would never have dared to think of anything so bold as laying poor ragged little brother near the blessed Christ-child. But everything seemed so strange and wonderful as she knelt there,—perhaps it was the holy night, perhaps it was the little Lord Jesus himself who whispered to her,—well, never mind what it was. But presently, scarcely knowing what she did, and moving as one in a dream, Margot rose to her feet,

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and lifting little brother in her arms, slipped softly up the steps of the altar, gliding past the kneeling kings and the shepherds, past Mother Mary and Saint Joseph, till she stood before the stalls where the ox and the ass seemed to watch her with wondering eyes. Then, stooping over the manger, swiftly she laid little brother, still wrapped in his tattered quilt, at the feet of the Christ-child shining in his snowy white linen and his golden halo. Pausing only to tuck some soft wisps of hay over the quilt, she moved quickly and silently back to her place on the floor; and there, the last bit of strength leaving her, she drew her shawl about her and sank into a

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heavy sleep, such as comes to those who are too weak and weary to bear more.

It seemed strange that no one had seen what Margot had done; but, as you know, the light was still dim and the worshippers at the different shrines were all kneeling with heads bowed in prayer. So they did not guess that little brother, who had never known a cradle of his own, was tucked there in the warm hay of the holy manger; while overhead still the golden star waited to twinkle, and round about, the candles to flame into radiant light, the angels to sing their glad songs, and the wise kings and the shepherds to bow lower still before the little

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Jesus. And still, up in the gray old tower, the bells were fairly quivering with the gold and silver notes they would by and by chime forth. Nor had they long now to wait, for the midnight was drawing near.

Soon came a troop of altar boys in white tunics and collars of lace and crimson velvet, and, stepping quickly from candle to candle, tipped them with shining flame till the shadowy cathedral blazed into golden light and the star over the manger glittered with a dazzling brightness. By this time the aisles were filled with a throng of people, who crossed themselves reverently, while on the altar the ox and the ass, the shepherds, the wise kings and

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the angels seemed listening breathlessly as suddenly the bells pealed forth their joyous message that the Christmas morning had begun. And then, while strains of sweet music came thrilling through the air, with a sound of solemn chanting the midnight service began.

Very stately, and almost as splendid as the three wise kings, looked the white-haired bishop, who led the chant, as he stood clad in his beautiful Christmas vestments richly embroidered with jewels and golden thread; and the two young priests beside him, though their robes were not so wonderful as his own, were none the less shining with white and gold in honor of the blessed birth-

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day. Round them all rose clouds of fragrant incense as sparkling censers were swung to and fro;—and still no one knew of little brother lying in the holy manger, nor noticed Margot, whom the music had roused from her sleep and who knelt now in the shadow of the altar steps, gazing with fascinated eyes at the creche.

As she watched the candles and the star, shining and twinkling, and listened to the glorious music, her pale, pinched little face grew lovely with happiness; so sure she was that her dream was true, that all was real; that it was indeed a bit of heaven itself up there on the altar, and that the little Jesus, Mother

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Mary, and the hovering angels would somehow take away all her troubles. As for little brother lying there at the feet of the Christ-child, at first he had been too cold and wretched to stir. But, by and by, the soft hay warmed his numb little body, and then, when the lights blazed out, slowly he opened his eyes, and oh! if you could have seen the wonder in them! He stared at the golden candle flames and the twinkling star in amazed delight, stared and stared, as if he would never leave off looking. Then at last his gaze fell on Mother Mary bending over the manger with her sweet face and her loving smile, and little brother, struggling feebly,

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freed his tiny arms from the covering quilt and reached them toward her with a little cry of gladness. But no one heard it, for at that moment a wave of music filled the air, quite drowning his baby voice.

So the service went on, till presently the last song was finished, and softly and slowly the joyous music trembled into silence. But the glad notes had scarcely died away and the worshippers had not yet risen to their feet, when suddenly little brother, who had reached his tiny hands in vain to Mother Mary, gave a shrill wail of despair. At first those farthest back in the cathedral paid no heed, thinking only that some mother, who had no one with

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whom to leave it, had brought her little one with her to the midnight mass. But those nearer the altar heard with surprise, for the cry sounded—but no, they thought, it could not possibly come from the *manger!*

But *hark!* Again it rose, the shrill cry of a baby, and there could no longer be any doubt that it was indeed the holy manger from which it came.

At once a great thrill of wonder swept through the cathedral. Some of the kneeling throng bowed their heads still lower in prayer, while others sprang to their feet crying out, "*A miracle! A miracle! The holy Babe lives again on earth!*"

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For they could think of nothing but that the image of the Christ-child, with his pretty curls and his golden halo, had come to life as it lay there in the hay.

But their cries were quickly hushed when they saw the look of horror and amazement on the face of one of the priests, who had hurried to the manger and was now bending over it. He was young and full of zeal for his faith. No doubt he became gentler as he grew older and saw more of the suffering of the world, but just then it seemed to him a dreadful and deadly sin that anyone should have dared to lay so ragged and miserable a waif as little brother in the manger of the blessed

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Jesus! At first he could not speak for horror; then slowly lifting from the nest of hay the forlorn little bundle, as if the poor wailing baby were an unholy thing, he held it at arm's length, taking care that its rags did not touch his own shining garments. And then, looking accusingly around, he asked, in a loud, harsh voice, "*Who has dared to do this impious thing?*"

At his look and his words the happy dream that had laid its spell upon little Margot was broken and fled away; and starting with fright, she could only gasp for breath. She felt now that she had been guilty of a dreadful sin, and she did not know what punishment she would

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receive. She was afraid; but then there was little brother who was not to blame and who might be punished instead, if they did not know; so, for his sake, she resolved to speak, for I have told you she was a brave child. Gathering together all her courage, "O reverend father," she said faintly, "It is only little brother. I laid him in the manger because he was so cold. It was just for a little while!" she added pleadingly.

On hearing this, the priest looked sternly at her. "Wicked girl," he said, "have you no parents to teach you reverence for sacred things?"

Poor Margot shook her head, and then bursting into terrified sobbing,

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she reached out her arms, crying pitiously, "O sir, give him to me, and I will go and find the children's God's House! I had lost the way."

The priest was about to hand little brother to her, perhaps glad thus to be rid of him, when suddenly the white-haired bishop, who had been listening to every word, stepped between.

Looking down at Margot with pitying eyes, "There, little one," he said gently, "dry your tears, and do not go away." Then, turning to the young priest, he held up a warning finger. "Have a care, my son! Have you forgotten the words of our Master concerning such as

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these?" And he looked meaningly at the two forlorn waifs. "Give the child to me!" he commanded, holding out his hands.

Bewildered and shame-faced, the young priest obeyed; and had poor little brother been in very truth the living Christ-child himself, the good bishop could not have received him more tenderly or more reverently. Closely he pressed him to his breast, quite heedless that the tattered quilt lay against his beautiful white robe with its sparkling jewels and embroidery of golden thread. And as he felt the gentle arms about him, little brother, his eyes still full of tears, stopped crying and smiled up into the eyes of the bishop, which—

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would you believe it?—were filled with shining tears also.

And then the good bishop stood up very straight and tall beside the manger, and oh, it was wonderful to see him, as, still clasping little brother close to his heart, he lifted his right hand! When he did that, over the throng of people, who had been watching and listening in silent amazement, there fell such a hush that I think you could almost have heard the snowflakes falling softly without. And then he spoke. His voice was not loud, but as clear and sweet and trembling with golden and silvery notes as the Christmas bells up in the tower; and, like them, it seemed to fill every

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shadowy nook of the gray old cathedral. "My children," he said to the people, "when the dear Christ-child, whose image lies in this manger, grew to be a man and walked on earth, you know He loved nothing so much as to have the little ones clustering about His feet; and you remember how often and how tenderly He held them in His arms." And then very simply, neither adding nor taking away a single syllable, he repeated the beautiful words which our Lord Jesus spoke concerning little children. That was all.

When he ended, there was a moment's pause, but only a moment, so the people might be quite sure he

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had finished; and then more than one, moved with compassion for the poor waifs, began to press forward. But hurrying swiftly ahead of all came a beautiful woman. Flinging back her furred mantle, she knelt before the altar and lifting up her arms imploringly to the bishop, "Reverend father," she said, "give me the little ones, and they shall be to me as my own children!" And a kindly faced man, who had followed her, knelt beside her, saying, "My lord bishop, as my wife says, even so they shall be to me."

The good bishop looked into the woman's face, as sweet and tender as the face of Mother Mary bending over the manger.

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“Daughter,” he said, smiling gently, “the good God has chosen, and it is not for me to deny His choice.” Then solemnly blessing them all, he laid little brother against the wife’s breast, while the husband lifted in his strong arms little Margot, into whose eyes the dream of heaven had returned, brighter and more lovely than before.

The people stood back for them, and thus they moved down the long aisle; and as they passed through the beautiful portal, the marble angels overhead seemed to flutter their white-plumed wings and watch them happily as they went out into the Christmas morning.

OLAF AND ASTRID'S
CHRISTMAS EVE

OLAF AND ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE



ONCE upon a time, in a small village in a far-away country, lived a little brother and sister, named Olaf and Astrid. Most of the village folk had comfortable cottages, with thatched roofs and cozy chimney corners; but the home of Olaf and Astrid was only a tumble-down hut by the edge of the road; for they were very poor. Their father was dead, and their mother, who was not strong, was obliged to toil all day long to keep them in bread; and it was only hard, black

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bread at that. All day long—stitch, stitch, stitch—she sewed at the work brought to her by her more well-to-do neighbors; and while she toiled, the children, who were bright, cheerful little souls, did their best to help. Every day Astrid tidied up the hut, while Olaf would trudge off to the near-by forest to gather faggots to burn; and it meant many weary loads for the little boy; for it was near Christmas time, and the winter was very cold. Nevertheless, though the wind whistled through the crevices of the hut, they managed always to keep a bit of fire on the hearth, and they did not complain if their bread was scanty and their fingers often numb with frost.

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

When the day before Christmas came, Olaf and Astrid went out with the village folk to the forest to gather the ground-pine and juniper berries which everybody liked to twine into pretty, green garlands to brighten their homes and make gay their windows against the time for lighting the Christmas candles. For you know that when, on the blessed Christmas-eve, the dear Christ-child comes down from heaven and softly treads the earth again, it pleases him to have those who love him set candles in their windows to cheer and guide him on his way.

As now the merry folk strayed through the forest, looking for the

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pine and juniper, there was much happy chatter of the beautiful Christmas trees trimmed and waiting for the morrow and of all the holiday goodies being made ready for the great day. Poor little Olaf and Astrid listened in silence, as they filled their arms with the trailing greens; but they thought that, even though they had neither tree nor sweetmeats, at least they could garland their window and set a light for the Christ-child.

But, alas, when dusk fell, and from the village windows one by one the tall wax candles—kept for the blessed night—began to twinkle, the poor children looked in vain for something to light. All they could

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

find was the half-burned end of a tallow candle—the last in the house. The mother sighed; but, “Never mind,” she said, “set it in the window. At least it will show the dear Christ-child that we love him.”

“And perhaps it will light him a few steps on his way,” said Astrid.

“Yes,” said Olaf, “and if he comes on the road through the forest, ours will be the first light he will see! Do you think he will come that way, mother?”

“I cannot tell, my child,” answered the mother, as, gathering up her work, she drew her chair near the window. She had many stitches to take before it was finished, and must sew as long as possible by the

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Christ-child's light; for she had no other. The wind blew in around the chinks of the window, and made the candle flame leap and flicker; but she drew her threadbare shawl closer about her shoulders and bravely stitched on.

Meantime the children had gone to the tiny bedroom, as she had bidden them; but, as they lay on their straw bed, they were not asleep. They were whispering together about how wonderful it was that the Christ-child should come down to earth for that one night; and, "Oh," cried Astrid, "how I wish we could see him!"

Olaf thought a moment, and then said, "I believe we could if we tried."

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

“But how?” said Astrid. “You know last year we watched, but the snow blew against the window pane, so nothing was to be seen!”

“Well,” replied Olaf, “if we walked out in the road, perhaps we could see him; and, if he reaches the village from this side, it might be we would meet him as he comes out of the forest.”

Astrid drew a long breath. “But—but—,” she said, “do you think mother will let us?”

“We can ask her,” answered Olaf. “But we will get ready first.” For Olaf, being a boy, was bolder than Astrid and always took the lead.

Hurriedly they sprang out of bed and eagerly dressed themselves in

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their carefully patched little garments, put on their thin stockings and worn little shoes, and then went into the other room. But their poor, tired mother was sitting motionless by the window. The work had fallen from her numb fingers, and, her head drooped on her breast, she slept in spite of herself.

As the children stood irresolute, "Poor mother!" they whispered. "We will not waken her. We will not be gone long. Surely the Christ-child will soon be coming, and we shall be back before she misses us."

Then quietly they opened the door, and closing it softly behind them, stepped out into the night.

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

They looked anxiously down the long village street, and, though the snow was falling, here and there they caught the twinkle of the wax candles; but no Christ-child could they see. Then they turned and looked toward the dark road beyond the village; for their hut stood on its outskirts.

“Somehow,” said Olaf, “it seems to me that he will come through the forest and down this road to the village. Let us walk along it a little way, and maybe we shall meet him.”

Astrid shivered a little, but she did not want Olaf to think her a coward; so, putting her hand in his, she trudged along beside him. Soon the wind, which had been

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blowing in fitful gusts, rose to a fierce gale, whirling the heavy snow in their faces and chilling them with bitter cold. As they tried vainly to make their way against the cruel blast, at last Astrid began to sob. "Oh, Olaf," she cried, "let us go back!"

By this time Olaf, too, was quite willing to turn back; but where? The blinding snow hid all the twinkling candles from sight, and everywhere it was very dark. They had no idea where their own little hut stood, for they had quite lost their way. On and on they stumbled, every moment their little bodies growing colder and colder in the piercing wind. By and by they

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

found themselves in the great forest, and now and again, as they tried to feel for some path, they would bruise their little hands against the icy trunks of the giant trees.

All the while the bitter cold was creeping closer and closer around their hearts and the chill white flakes falling faster and faster as they wandered on, till at last, in despair, they were about to sink down in a snow-drift to die. But just as they had given up all hope, suddenly a low, murmuring voice reached their ears. It was like the soft whispering of pine boughs in summer, only clearer and plainer, and it came from a young fir tree growing near by. "Come hither, little ones," it mur-

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mured, "and nestle under my boughs! I will shelter you."

Tremblingly the shivering children groped their way toward the friendly voice, and, sinking down in the snow, crept beneath the fir branches, which, as it was a young tree, grew very near the ground. Immediately the soft green boughs seemed to close about and caress them. The icy chill thawed from around their hearts and the warm blood tingled to their finger-tips.

Before long the fir boughs began murmuring and whispering again, as if they had something wonderful to tell; but as neither Olaf nor Astrid could quite understand them, presently their eyes began to blink as

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they nestled in their cozy little shelter. Perhaps they slept a little; but soon they sat up very wide awake, for the most marvelous white light was beginning to stream through the rustling branches.

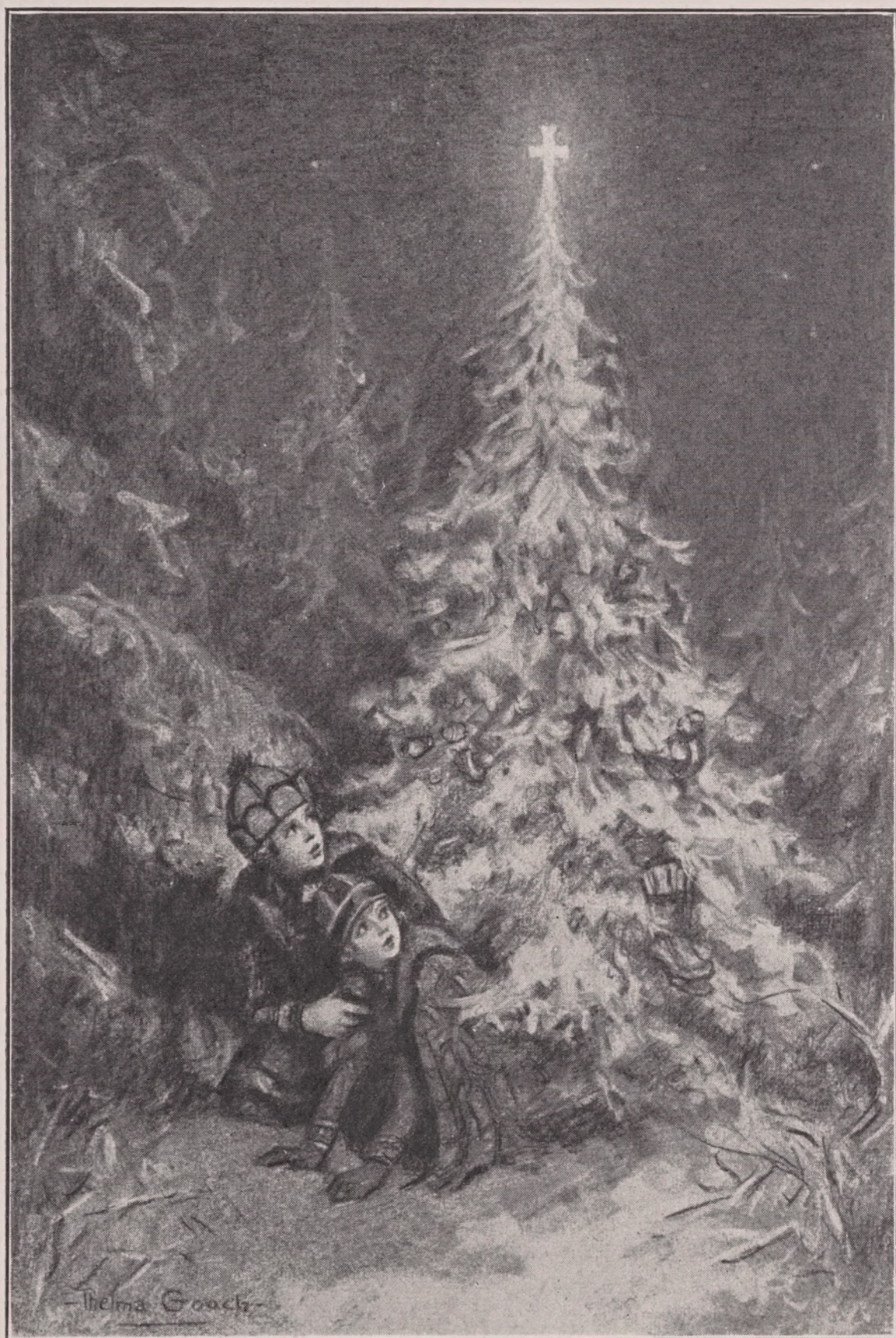
“Can it be the moon?” whispered Astrid. Olaf peered from out their shelter; but, though the snow had ceased to fall, he could see no moon, —only the bleak, cloudy sky.

Yet brighter and brighter grew the strange white light. It was like the whiteness of thousands of Easter lilies, flooding the fir tree with a dazzling radiance. And all at once the children were overwhelmed with happiness; they did not know why, but their little hearts

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seemed fairly bursting with joy. Never in all their lives had they felt so glad. The fir tree, too, seemed filled with joy; for its soft whispering had changed to a flute-like, silvery singing, high and sweet and thrilling with gladness, and all its little icy cones were clapping together with a tinkling music.

Wonder-struck, the children crept out a little way from beneath its boughs, so they could look up at it; for the most marvelous things were happening. As the lovely white light poured over it, they saw that the snow on its topmost branches had turned into a glittering golden star; all the filmy threads of hoarfrost which had covered it became



“ THE CHILDREN CREPT OUT A LITTLE WAY FROM BENEATH
ITS BOUGHS ”

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

shimmering silver and gold cobwebs; while, as they looked, they could see all the little icy cones swelling—some into pink-cheeked apples of sugar, others into gilded nuts or cornucopias of sugar-plums. And then all the feathery green boughs broke into the strangest blossoming. Suddenly they were hung with the gayest and most bewitching playthings.

As Olaf and Astrid gazed at the marvelous tree, more beautiful than anything they had ever dreamed of, with little cries of delight they reached out their arms toward it, as if they would hug it to their breasts, though they did not venture to touch it. But, even as they stretched out

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their arms, they felt them filled with the wonderful sweetmeats and playthings. As they sank back with joyous sighs of content, slowly the white radiance began to pale—and pale; and then a great drowsiness came upon the children, and, still clasping their treasures close to their hearts, they crept back beneath the fir boughs and fell asleep.

At daybreak there came a tinkle of sleigh-bells through the forest; for a traveler from a distant village was on the road early. As he drove along between the great pines and hemlocks, all at once he noticed the young fir tree. Not that there was anything strange about it, as it stood

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green and feathery, laden only with little drifts of snow; but under its boughs there was a bright gleam of scarlet.

The traveler stopped his sleigh, and, going to the spot, what should he see but Olaf and Astrid still sound asleep! They were dressed in little red coats with shining buttons, and warm caps and mittens. On Olaf's feet were red-topped boots, such as he had long wished for, and Astrid wore pretty little shoes of scarlet leather. The pockets of their coats were stuffed with sugar-plums and sweetmeats, and the children were still hugging their wonderful toys.

The traveler looked at them in utter amazement. At first he

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thought they must be frozen, lying there in the bitter cold. But, as he stooped to lift them from the snow, they opened happy eyes and smiled at him. "How now!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Who are you, and how came you here?"

"Please, sir," said Olaf, gathering his wits together, "we are Olaf and Astrid, and we came out to see the Christ-child." Here he caught sight of all his new finery, and was dumb with surprise. So, too, was Astrid, who was so bewildered that she could answer no more questions. The traveler decided they were children from the village who must have strayed from home, and he was about to lift them into the sleigh

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when suddenly he paused; for he had noticed something in the snow where a drift had left it smooth. "Where," he asked Olaf, "is the *other* child who was with you?"

"There was no one but Astrid, sir," answered Olaf.

"But look!" said the traveler sharply. "There must have been another; for here in the snow are the prints of little bare feet!"

But, even as they stared at these, tiny white flames seemed to play over them, melting the snow; and where every footprint had been there sprang up a tuft of violets. At this the traveler uncovered his head and knelt in the snow beside them.

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When he rose to his feet, he said no more, but, placing the children in the sleigh, drove to the village; and when Olaf pointed out their hut, he took them to the door and softly opened it. The mother, still sitting by the window, started from her sleep; for so weary had she been that all night long she had not wakened. The candle had burned to its socket, and the faggots on the hearth were only a heap of ashes; but, in spite of the wintry cold, the room was warm and pleasant, and the work, which had fallen from her tired fingers, lay finished and folded in her lap.

The traveler went on to the village inn for his Christmas breakfast; and,

ASTRID'S CHRISTMAS EVE

when he told the strange things he had seen, the news quickly flew from mouth to mouth, and soon all the villagers were flocking to the little hut. There, when they saw Olaf's and Astrid's wonderful gifts, and heard the marvelous happenings of the night, they looked at each other in awe, and whispered one to another: "Surely it was no other than the blessed Christ-child himself who passed through the forest last night and took compassion on these fatherless little ones!"

And then more than one face among them reddened with shame, as they remembered how selfish and thoughtless they themselves had been to let their poor neighbors suffer.

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Right away they set to work with hammers and saws, and stopped up the chinks and made the little hut warm and comfortable; for how better, they said, could they keep the Christ-child's birthday? Then they saw to it that the rickety little table held a share of their own Christmas cheer.

Nor did the good villagers now that they had wakened up, forget their kindnesses, and day by day the poor mother found her burdens lightened by many a helping hand. And, as for Olaf and Astrid, why, there were no happier children in all the world!

HOW NIAL WON THE
BEAUTIFUL PRINCESS

HOW NIAL WON THE BEAUTIFUL
PRINCESS



LONG, long ago in Ireland there were no towns or villages; only wattled houses, made of hazel-rods and plaster, scattered through the country. Everybody had a bee-hive and a cow and a little oatfield, because the things they liked best of all to eat and drink were honey and milk and porridge. In the middle of the kingdom rose a high mound, and on top of this stood the King's palace, which was made of wood handsomely carved, with the door-posts inlaid with gold

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and silver and precious stones.

The King was good-natured and easy-going; and though he wore a rich mantle and wide torque or collar of gold, and many bracelets, and his crown was of fine gold and covered his head like a broad-brimmed hat, nevertheless every day he and the Queen and their only child, a beautiful young Princess, ate their honey and porridge and drank their milk just like everybody else. This greatly displeased the high chamberlain who managed the affairs of the palace, and who was proud and haughty and thought it wrong that the King did not put on more airs.

So one morning, as breakfast was being served to the royal family, the

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chamberlain made bold to go before the King. "Your Highness," he said, bowing very low, "though your dishes are gold and silver, the food they hold is the same as the common people have, and they will think you no better than they. Shall I not order something more rare and costly?"

"Why, no," said the King, looking at him in surprise, "we like these things best." Then, as he was about to dip a spoonful of honey over his porridge, "If it will satisfy you," he added, "I will make a law that nobody but myself and the Queen and the Princess be allowed to eat honey on their porridge for breakfast. That will show them I

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am a King and can make laws which they must obey.”

With that, he dismissed the chamberlain, who was not at all pleased with the way things had turned out, but who was obliged to proclaim the new law throughout the kingdom. Nobody else liked it, either, when they found they might no longer eat honey on their porridge. But the people were peaceable and well-behaved, and the King had always before treated them kindly, so no one dreamed of disobeying him; indeed, if they did, they knew they would be punished by the high chamberlain.

So much for the folks who lived above ground. But they were not

HOW NIAL WON THE PRINCESS

the only people in Ireland; for, hidden under all the green hills and meadows, were hundreds and hundreds of fairies.

These fairies, who had once been mortals like the rest, had been conquered in war and about to be sold into slavery, but, being wise in magic, had been able to cast a spell over themselves, so that they became smaller and smaller, and at last turned into fairies. Then they crept under-ground and built themselves wonderful halls and palaces. In these they feasted every day on magic meat and mead which kept them forever young and beautiful. Often, on moonlight nights, they would come out to dance and frolic

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in the meadows; though always they kept out of sight of grown folks, for they had not forgotten that it was grown folks who conquered them in war. But if now and then a boy or girl chanced to spy their merry-making, they did not mind; though they would whisper to them to keep what they had seen to themselves. And the children promised, and always kept their word to the little people.

Now at this time, in one of the smallest of the wattled houses, lived a poor woman named Bridget, and her only child, a bright-eyed boy called Nial. They had no torques or bracelets, and their clothes were old and ragged; but they had a lit-

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tle bee-hive, and a cow, and a tiny bit of ground where they raised a few oats for porridge. A peat bog was near, so they always had a fire on the hearth; and that contented they were, Bridget would sing over her work and Nial whistle as merrily as if he were a king's son.

Every day Nial took the cow to pasture; but one spring evening, when he went as usual to bring her to the byre, she had strayed into the bog. It took a while to find her, and when he did and started for home, the moon was up and flooding the meadow ahead of him with a silvery light. As he stepped along through the green grass, all at once he heard a low, tinkling sound, for

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all the world like a brook when the ice begins to thaw in April. Then the tinkling grew livelier and faster and turned into a rollicking dance tune.

“Musha!” said Nial to the cow walking soberly ahead of him, “D’ye hear that, and can ye still keep your hoofs on the ground? I’ve a mind to jig it with ye myself!”

Just then there rose a flutter of gauzy wings, and the little people began to come. They seemed to creep from under the tufts of cow-slips and butter-cups, hundreds of them, till “Whisht!” cried Nial softly to the cow, “Now just run along to the byre—ye know the way. As for me, I must bide here a

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while!" And he quickly hid himself in a clump of hazel bushes, though not before the fairies had caught sight of him.

Immediately the fairy Queen sent a messenger to discover who he was; but when they found it was only Nial, "Let him be," said the Queen, "he is a good boy and will do no mischief." For they knew Nial for a kindly soul who never harmed a living creature, bird or beast, and who always took pains never to tread on a flower if he could help it. So, catching hold of hands, the little people began to dance. Round and round they tripped in the maddest, merriest frolicking, their gauzy wings glimmering, their little sil-

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ver shoes twinkling, and their gay little caps and mantles looking like bits of whirling rainbows. And no wonder, for they were made of the brightest spring flowers, tulips and daffodils, peach-blossoms and hyacinths,—Nial fairly blinked as he watched them.

“Now,” said he, admiringly to himself, “did ever ye see a handsomer sight? And look at the colors on yonder little lady! Sure, our Queen herself has nothing finer!” For the more bright colors the Irish folk had in their clothes, the better they liked it.

As the moon now began to wane and the fairies to creep out of sight, he noticed that the gay little mantles

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and caps and what not, that he had thought so handsome, were many of them torn and frayed from their wild frolicking.

“Musha!” again said Nial to himself, “ ’Tis no matter for the likes of me to be wearing of a ragged coat, but ’tis a pity for the little people not to be spic and span. I’ll warrant it took a good two hours to hunt through the meadows for all those pretties they’ve got on their backs, and since they have behaved so fine to me, it’s I that will be helping of them another night.”

When Nial had crept out of the hazel bushes and reached home, “Och now!” said his mother, “ ’Tis that worried I’ve been! The cow’s

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in the byre since moonrise, and sure I was that the little people had carried ye off!"

"'Tis a bit of a handful they would be having, Mother!" said Nial, as he laughed and straightened himself up; for he was a likely lad, strong and well grown for his years. "It's moon-struck I must have been, Mother, as I came through the meadow." And Nial threw himself on his bed and pretended to fall asleep; for he did not want to be questioned about what he had seen.

The next day, when he drove the cow through the meadow, there was a ring of tall green grass where the fairies had danced, and he could think of nothing else.

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“Maybe,” he said to himself, “they will come again tonight. Anyway, it’s ready I’ll make for them.”

So before dusk fell, he went about gathering handfulls of cowslips and daisies, primroses and harebells, all the gayest flowers he could find, and heaped them on the grass near the fairy ring. Then he slipped into the spring-house where Bridget had set the evening’s milk, and filling a small gourd dipper, carried it out and stood it in the grass beside the flowers. “I’m thinking,” he said, “the little people will be liking of a drop of new milk as well as anybody!” For everybody knows that fairies are very fond of fresh milk.

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After supper, when Bridget was sound asleep, Nial quietly slipped out of bed, and unbarring the door, ran swiftly down to the meadow and hid in the hazel bushes as before. By and by, when the moon came up, sure enough, out crept the little people to dance and frolic again. When they saw the preparations Nial had made for them, they were mightily pleased. They frisked about sipping the new milk, and then they whisked the flowers on, caps and mantles of harebells and hyacinths, cowslips and primroses. My, how gay they looked and how they danced!

Before they flitted away to their underground palaces, the fairy

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Queen said that as Nial had shown his kind heart, they would do something for him. So flying to the beehive, she touched it with her wand, bewitching the bees so that they might make the finest flavored honey in all Ireland. Also she stroked with her wand the forehead of the cow, so she might give an inexhaustible supply of the richest milk.

The next day Nial slept late, and Bridget, not wishing to wake the lad, ate her porridge alone. After a while, when her work was done, seeing the honey dish was empty, she went to the hive and brought in a fresh comb;—and then, when she tasted it, she smacked her lips in amazement. “Musha!” she ex-

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claimed, tasting and smacking again, "Was ever there the likes of this! Why, lad, our bees must be bewitched!"

Nial, who had roused up, laughed to himself, but said nothing of how near the truth she had guessed.

"Why," went on Bridget, "'tis honey fit for a king!" Then, her words putting an idea into the good woman's head, "Bedad, now," she said, "'tis just stepping up to the King's palace I'll be to carry a bit for the porridge of the young Princess!" For all the Irish folk knew that the Princess was exceedingly fond of honey.

"All right, Mother," said Nial, who was beginning to eat the plain

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oat porridge Bridget had set before him for breakfast, "but before ye go, just give me a bit on my porridge here."

"What?" cried his mother, bewildered. "Ye know well 'tis not for the likes of us to be eating honey on porridge; that's only for king folks! But sure, lad, 'tis only plaguing me ye are!" And never doubting that Nial was only teasing her, off she bustled for the palace, which was not far away.

But the minute she shut the door, Nial, who was a bold lad, reached over for the honey dish, and, with a twinkle in his eye, muttering, "'Tis a pity if I can't be playing it's a king's son I am!" dipped his big

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horn spoon full and poured it over his porridge. Then he smacked his lips, as Bridget had done, when he tasted it, and made haste to pour on some more.

Before he had finished, Bridget, who walked quickly, had reached the palace. The young Princess was just ready for breakfast, and when her porridge was brought in covered with the bewitched honey, and she tasted it, my, my, that pleased she was, you never saw the like! Immediately she begged the King, her father, to buy Bridget's bees and have their hive placed in the royal garden. At once the King sent out a generous purse of gold, and commanded the high

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chamberlain to buy the bees and to reward the good woman who had brought the honey.

But the chamberlain, who was as dishonest and grasping as he was proud, determined to find some other way to get the bees, and to keep the purse for himself:—and the chance came quicker than he thought. For, as bad luck had it, just as Nial was pouring the honey from his horn spoon over his porridge, along came a withered old crone, who was friend to nobody; and peering in the window, she saw Nial. Nodding her head knowingly, she hobbled off to the palace to tell what she had seen.

The high chamberlain rubbed

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his hands with pleasure, and immediately sent a servant to seize Bridget's bee-hive as punishment for Nial's act.

When the poor woman reached home and found how things were, "*Ochone! Ochone!*" she moaned to herself, and covering her head with her apron, all day long she rocked to and fro weeping bitterly.

When dusk fell, Nial, who was very miserable, went out into the meadow. The moon was waning, so there was not light enough for the fairies to dance; nevertheless, a few were flitting about enjoying the cool air and sipping the dew. When Nial, who had become very good friends with the little people,

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told them about losing the bewitched bee-hive, they were very indignant. And when they slipped underground and repeated it to their Queen, she was downright angry and vowed that if Nial could not have the wonderful honey, neither should the King's daughter. So she commanded a messenger to go to the hive and whisper to the bees that the meadows of the King of France were much finer and flowerier, and they would do well to go there.

The bees, at hearing this, at once prepared to fly across the sea; and as they are gossippy little creatures, they told the other bees in the royal hives, and soon the word spread through all the kingdom,

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and, swarm after swarm, all the bees flew away to the meadows of the King of France.

When the Irish folk found their bees gone, they set up a great lamentation! Nobody could understand what had become of them, and they did not see how they could get along without their favorite food. The high chamberlain, thinking Nial must have something to do with the matter, sent and had him brought before the King. But to all their questions and threats the lad answered so bravely and fearlessly, and declared so truthfully that he knew nothing about it (for he did not know the fairy queen had sent the bees away), that they were obliged

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to let him go; though the high chamberlain took away the milk cow, just for spite, and poor Bridget wrung her hands in vain.

Soon it was whispered about that the beautiful young Princess was pining away! Having no honey for it, she would not touch her porridge, and was growing so pale and thin that the court physician declared that, unless the bees were brought back, she would surely die.

At this, the King, in despair, sent heralds through the kingdom, blowing on trumpets and proclaiming that whoever brought the bees back should be richly rewarded, and, if a young man, should be solemnly betrothed to the beautiful Princess

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and marry her as soon as she reached a suitable age. The word spread through neighboring kingdoms, and many handsome young princes set their wits to work to win the beautiful Princess; but all in vain, for nobody knew where the bees were, or how to get them back again.

Meantime it was the dark of the moon, and Nial's friends, the fairies, no longer came to the meadow, but danced and froliced in their underground palaces. Still, Nial kept hoping that, by and by, they would come out again; and then, he thought, he would make bold to ask their help. For he was a fearless lad, and, despite his ragged coat, did not see why he should not try for the

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Princess the same as anybody else.

So when next the moon was full and the meadow flooded with silver, he took pains to gather handfulls of the finest flowers he could find, and heaped them up as before. He could not bring new milk, because the high chamberlain had taken their cow; but he looked about and, spying some foxgloves, "There, now!" he cried, "'tis like pitchers of dew they are, for the little people!" Then, *snip! snap!* the evening primroses began to break, and filling his hands with their yellow cups, he set them with the foxgloves by the fairy rings. "Sure," he said to himself as he looked at them, "I'll be thinking the gold cups and

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platters of the King's folks are no handsomer sight!"

Nial had scarcely finished making ready for them, when, sure enough, the little people began to come out, and they all felt very friendly toward Nial for his kindness. He kept behind the hazel bushes and waited till they had finished their frolic; and had poured all the dew from the foxglove pitchers into the primrose cups, from which they sipped it gladly, as their dancing had made them very warm and thirsty. Then, stepping out, he dropped on his knees before the fairy Queen. Very big and awkward he looked kneeling there before the little lady, but she

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listened soberly as he told about the lost bees and how anxious he was to win the beautiful Princess.

When he had finished, the Queen frowned a bit, for she remembered sending away the bees without thinking what mischief it would do; for the fairies are fickle little folks, and do not greatly trouble themselves about the affairs of mortals. She was sorry for Nial, though, and determined to help him. So she thought a minute, and then she said, "Well, lad, it was I who sent off the bees to the meadows of the King of France; but it was easier to send them off than it will be to get them back again. I cannot send one of my messengers there, as we fairies

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never leave our own country; and besides, the fairies of France are not friendly to us and might do an ill turn. Nor would it do any good for you to go, for the bees would pay no attention to you. There is another way, however to get them back.”

“Faith, Ma’am,” said Nial eagerly, “I’ll do your bidding, though ’tis to fight the King of France himself!”

The lad looked so very brave and bold, that the fairy Queen smiled. “No,” she said, “ ’tis not to France you must be going, but to the Northland. So get your knapsack ready for a journey. Put in it some oat-cakes, this ball of silver cord (and she handed Nial a glittering ball),

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and a cage large enough for two birds; you can make this yourself from the osiers by the brook. Then carry a spade over your shoulder, and set out for the seashore. There you must take ship for the Northland. When you get there, walk inland till you come to a green meadow where a small silver birch tree is growing. There will be a number of cuckoos singing from its branches, and where the notes of their song fall to the ground you will see hundreds of golden yellow flowers springing up. Now you must get two of these cuckoos and put them in your cage."

"Musha, Ma'am!" exclaimed Nial. "And is it salting of their

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tails I must be doing? Never yet have I managed to salt a bird's tail, Ma'am, and 'tis many times I've tried." And he looked so hopeless, that the Queen was like to laugh.

"No," she answered, "you need not trouble yourself about their tails; I will teach you some charm words, and when you say them to the birds they will come to your hand easily. Then you must dig up the birch tree and wrap its roots carefully with the silver cord; then sling it over your shoulder—for you are a stout lad—and bring it along; for unless the cuckoos sing from the boughs of the silver birch of the Northland, the yellow flowers will not spring up."

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“Bedad, Ma’am,” broke in Nial again, “but how is all that going to bring back the bees?”

“Never mind,” said the Queen sharply, “and ask no more questions! It is your business to do exactly as I bid you.”

So Nial listened meekly as the Queen taught him the charm words, and told him to bring the birch tree home and plant it in the meadow, and then to hang the cuckoos’ cage on its boughs and open the door and see what happened.

When she had finished, Nial thanked her as politely as he knew how, and then he hurried back home; and early the next morning he set about to do her bidding. He

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found an old knapsack, and Bridget baked some oat-cakes for his journey. These he put in the knapsack, together with the ball of silver cord and the cage, which he made from osiers as the fairy said. Then carrying a spade over his shoulder, he set out for the seashore. There he found a ship about to sail for the Northland; and though he had not a penny, he whistled so merrily and laughed so heartily and promised so faithfully to work his way, that the captain took him along right willingly.

When he reached the Northland, it all turned out exactly as the fairy Queen had said. He found the green meadow with the silver birch



“ AS SOON AS HE SAID OVER THE CHARM WORDS THE QUEEN
HAD TAUGHT HIM, BACK THEY CAME ”

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tree full of cuckoos, and thousands of yellow flowers dotting the grass as they sang. Carefully stepping between these so as not to crush them, and taking the osier cage in one hand, he walked toward the tree; and though at first all the cuckoos flew away, as soon as he said over the charm words the Queen had taught him, back they came; and the first thing he knew two of them were fluttering round his head, and then they perched, one on each shoulder.

“Whishst now, my pretties!” he said, laughing softly. “Sure and if ye’ll be stepping into this handsome cage here, I’ll take ye to a land as much finer than this as a shamrock

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than a cockle-burr!" Then as he hummed over the charm once more, the cuckoos flew into the cage, and he shut the door.

Next he set to work to dig up the birch tree, and carefully wrapping its roots with the silver cord, he slung it over his shoulder together with the spade, and with the cage in his hand, again set out for the seashore. There he found the same ship in which he had sailed to the Northland, and the captain, who was about to start back to Ireland, took him along right willingly, as before.

When they reached the land and Nial set off for the home meadow, now and then folks came out of their

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wattled houses and asked him where he was going with his birch tree and cage of yellow birds; for no cuckoos had ever before come to Ireland. And when Nial answered, "'Tis bringing back the bees I'm after doing!" the people pricked up their ears and followed along to see how he would do it.

There were so many of them that they made a great circle about the home meadow, where they stood and watched as Nial carefully planted the birch tree and hung the open cage on its branches, as the fairy Queen had told him. Immediately the little people underground unwrapped the silver cord from its roots and spread them out so that

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the birch tree at once began to grow and flourish. Then the cuckoos, flying out of the cage, perched on its branches and began to sing; and as their notes fell to the ground, thousands of golden flowers sprang up through the grass. And *whiff!* *whiff!* as the Irish sun, so much warmer than in the Northland, shone on them, my, my, how sweet they smelled! Never was there anything like it! All the roses and honeysuckles in the world were as nothing to it!

“Och! Och!” cried everybody, “was ever the likes of it for pleasantness!”

Soon the wind began to blow toward the meadows of the King of

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France; stronger and stronger it blew, till *sniff! sniff!* the bees there stopped in their buzzing. *Sniff! sniff!* right away, swarm after swarm, they flew straight across the sea for Ireland and began to fill their honey-bags from the golden flowers; and then they settled down in their old hives and forgot all about the meadows of the King of France.

Everybody was mightily pleased to have the bees back again; but the high chamberlain was very angry when he found it was Nial who had coaxed them home. When the King asked him who had brought them back, he told him it was one of the handsome young Princes who had tried in vain. But the truth

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could not be kept back, for too many people had seen what Nial had done; and his friends soon found means to tell the King. They told him also how wicked the high chamberlain was, and the King was very angry and commanded the hive of bewitched bees and the milk cow to be restored at once to Bridget, together with the purse of gold which the chamberlain had kept from her. Then he banished the high chamberlain himself to a wattled hut in a far-off corner of the kingdom, and ordered that he was to have nothing but thin porridge and water to live on the rest of his life.

Nevertheless, though the King had tried to set things to rights with

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Nial and his mother, he was very sad to think that the hand of the beautiful Princess was promised to a poor ragged lad; and as for the Princess, she began to weep bitterly. At this the King, who could not bear to see her cry, said, "Never mind, my dear. 'Tis a poor lad he is, and I'll warrant for a few bags of gold 'tis willing enough he'll be to let me off from my promise; and to make it sure, I'll tell him plainly that if he marries you 'tis nothing at all he'll be getting but a wife to support!"

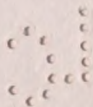
At this, the tears of the Princess broke out afresh, and the King, distracted, sent at once for Nial.

When the lad was brought into

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the palace, the King commanded that a large chest be placed before him, and then told him to lift the lid. When Nial did so, he opened his eyes wide, for it was filled with the finest golden torques and bracelets, besides bags of gold and jewels. "Nial," said the King, "if you free me from my promise to betroth the Princess, the chest is yours. But I will tell you plainly, lad," and here the King frowned, "if 'tis the Princess you are set on having, not a penny goes with her, and 'tis only a wife to support you will be getting."

On hearing this, Nial, turning up his nose at the chest full of gold, fell on his knees before the beautiful Princess, just as he had knelt to the



HOW NIAL WON THE PRINCESS

fairy queen, and smiling up at her,

“Bedad, Ma’am,” he said, “if it’s willing to marry me ye are, why, as for yonder torques and bags of gold, the King, your father, may toss them into the sea for all I’ll be caring! It’s my stout two hands that will work for ye, and ’tis I that will wait on ye like as if ye were the fairy Queen herself!”

To the surprise of everybody, when Nial began to speak the Princess had quickly dried her eyes; and when he finished, in spite of his ragged coat he looked so bold and handsome with his yellow hair and his ruddy cheeks and merry blue eyes, and he lifted his head so proudly, that the beautiful Princess

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smiled back at him. Putting out both her hands, "Nial," she said, "'tis yourself and nobody else I'll be marrying, and the torques and bracelets and bags of gold may go to the bottom of the sea for all I'll be caring either!"

At the speech of the Princess everybody stared in amazement; and the King, being good-natured and easy-going, laughed outright when he saw how things were turning out and that the Princess was happy. "Well, well," he said, "so be it! And 'tis changing my mind I'll be about the Princess having no dowry." Then he told Nial to pick from the chest the handsomest torques and bracelets for himself

HOW NIAL WON THE PRINCESS

and Bridget, and he commanded the court tailors and dress-makers to set to work on the finest clothes for them; and when these were finished he ordered a grand feast, and Nial and the Princess were solemnly betrothed. The Princess wore a gown of white velvet sewn with pearls, and carried a bouquet of the wonderful yellow flowers from the meadow; and while the betrothal was going on, the two cuckoos came and perched, one on her shoulder and one on Nial's, and sang as if they would burst their throats.

In due time, when Nial was grown to a fine strong young man and the Princess was more beautiful than ever, they had a splendid

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wedding and lived happily ever after. And proud enough the King and Queen were to have so brave and handsome a son.

This is the story of how Nial won the beautiful Princess, and of how the first cuckoos came to Ireland.

THE WISHING-SPRING

THE WISHING-SPRING



It was Midsummer Eve, and the Irish meadows glimmered green and flowery beyond a little cabin close to a grass-grown road. It had clay walls and a roof thatched with straw, and near by were a potato-patch and a pen holding a white pig with a curly tail; in the doorway a few hens were clucking, now and then straggling in and out of the open door as they pleased.

Within the cabin a little girl was tending a baby, while her mother stirred a pot of porridge hanging over an open fire of peat, and her

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father sat smoking his pipe beside the hearth. Presently, "Come now, Biddy!" said her mother. "Bring Peter here whilst we have a bite and sup. 'Tis to the bonfire soon your father would be going." And she took the baby on her lap, and dished the porridge into earthen bowls, and poured the tea from a cracked teapot.

As Biddy took up her wooden spoon, "Mother," she asked, "did ever ye see the midsummer fairies?"

"Bedad, no!" said her mother. "Not I! But folks do say the little people will be creeping out and playing of their pranks tomorrow."

"Yes," said Biddy's father, nodding his head wisely, "and some say

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their magic begins this night. I dare say they will soon be dancing with the young folks around the bonfire, if only we could be seeing of them.”

Here Peter, who had got a spoonful of hot tea when his mother was not looking, began to scream, and cried so hard that Biddy could ask no more questions; and her father, not waiting for him to stop, took his cap and went across the meadow to a hill where a bonfire was already lighted, and young people were dancing around it and singing at the tops of their voices.

Why were they doing it? Dear me, I do not know, except that they always did so on Midsummer Eve—

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and perhaps do now, for all I can tell. Neither do I know why Irish folks declare that on Midsummer Day, which is the twenty-fourth of June, the fairies—or “little people,” as they like to call them—will creep out from under the fields and hills, where they have beautiful palaces, and play around above ground, where they may do one a good or ill turn, according to whether they are pleased or not. Folks say, too, that the fairies swim about in certain little bubbling springs of Ireland, and that, if you sip the water from one of these on Midsummer Day and make a wish, at the same time offering some gift the fairies like, they will surely cause the wish to come

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true. Why they say all these things, as I told you before, I am sure I cannot tell; but, as everybody agrees that Ireland has always been a fine place for fairies, I dare say the people there know a great deal about them. It might even be that, if you look sharp on the twenty-fourth of June, you may see some fairies in this country. Mind, I do not say you will; but then, neither do I say you won't!

Now, of course Bidy had heard much of the little people, and she could not understand why, though there was a "wishing-spring" not far from the cabin, and she had tried it for two Midsummer Days, her wish had not come true. The trouble

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was that she did not know about taking a gift of the right kind for the fairies. But the day of our story she had found out. That afternoon a very wise old woman had chanced to come hobbling along the road by the cabin and had stopped to rest, and Biddy had brought her a drink from the spring and had fallen to talking with her. It was she who told Biddy that there were five kinds of herbs which, though just ordinary plants at other times, became magical on Midsummer Eve; and, if their flowers were gathered then under the light of a full moon, a bunch of them offered to the fairies would please them so that they would not fail to grant any wish.

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When Biddy heard this, she made up her mind to get some that very night, when the moon would be full, and the next day to try the wishing-spring again. And she had a very good chance to go and gather them; for, when Peter at last stopped crying and went to sleep, her mother was so worn out with him that, throwing herself down on the bed beside him, she was soon sound asleep, too. Then, softly opening the door, Biddy ran to the meadow. The moon had risen, and it was so light that she had little trouble in finding what she wanted; for the meadow was full of wild flowers. "There," said she presently, counting to herself, "I have a rose, and

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vervain, and trefoil, and St. John's-wort, and meadow-rue—that's the five; and it's a sprig of honeysuckle I'll be putting in for the nice smell of it, and 'tis sure I am the little people will like it, too, even if it's not magical!" And she sniffed the sweet cluster as she tucked it into her nosegay. Then, hurrying home, she put the flowers in a pitcher of water and crept into bed.

The next morning, just as soon as she had her breakfast of porridge and before Peter had wakened up to be tended, taking her nosegay she ran to the wishing-spring and, kneeling beside it, began dabbling it in the water. Just then, "Och, Biddy!" called out a red-haired boy

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who had come up behind her. "Are ye after trying the wishing-spring again? The fairies won't heed ye!"

"Whisht, Pat!" said she, looking up at the boy, who was her good friend and playmate. "You just watch and see now!"

"What will ye be wishing this time, Biddy?" asked Pat, coming nearer to the spring.

"Silly!" said Biddy. "It's well enough ye know that, if I tell, 'tis spoilt the wish will be!" Here she stooped low over the spring and, loosening the nosegay, let it float about, as, scooping up some water in her hand, she sipped it and whispered softly, so Pat could not hear; "'Tis a beautiful Princess I'm wish-

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ing to be, and wearing of a velvet gown and a pearl necklace, and to be living in a grand castle and marrying of a king's son!"

Then, as she and Pat peered into the bubbling water, "Look! Look!" cried Bidy. "There is one of the little people now! See him down there in the sand playing with the bubbles? It's a red cap he's wearing and a blue coat! Oh, Pat, there's another—a little lady fairy!"

Pat stared open-mouthed, and, "Bidy," he began,—but all at once she seemed fading away from him, and on her part she could no longer see Pat. Tall stone walls began to rise around her; higher and higher they grew, into a castle tower; and



““LOOK! LOOK!” CRIED BIDDY. “THERE IS ONE OF THE LITTLE PEOPLE NOW!””

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soon she found herself in a large room, all hung with wonderful embroidered silk, and furnished with carved chairs and tables and chests, such as Bidy had never seen the like of before. She was sitting on a kind of throne, richly carved and cushioned with cloth of gold. Looking down at her feet, which had been bare, she saw she was wearing golden slippers worked with pearls, and, instead of her ragged dress, she had on one of purple velvet, stiff with gold thread. Around her throat was a necklace of pearls, and on her head she could feel a fine lace cap. Her hair was braided with strands of jewels, and her eyes were very bright and her cheeks

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glowing; though Bidy had really been pretty enough before, with her tangled black curls and eyes of Irish blue. Indeed, Pat thought her quite as beautiful as any Princess; though, to be sure, he had never seen a King's daughter.

When Bidy looked around her she saw six handsomely dressed waiting-maids standing on each side of her, and a very grand-looking lady who seemed to be directing them. Soon one of them came and, bowing very low, said, "Will Your Highness be served with breakfast now?"

Bidy, you remember, had already had her porridge; but, as Princesses are not expected to get up so early,

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she thought best not to mention it; so she just nodded her head, and at once they brought in a golden tray and set it before her. There was fine white bread, milk in a golden goblet, a golden bowl full of barley porridge covered with honey, and a number of other things of which Bidly did not even know the names. She awkwardly picked up a gold spoon and dipped it in the porridge, but she was staring around so hard that, instead of putting it into her mouth, it bumped against her nose, and all the porridge fell in her lap; and then, as she put down the spoon in dismay, over went the goblet of milk on top of the rest. "Musha!" she cried. "'Tis my grand velvet

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gown that is all spoilt! Och!
Och!”

But most of the waiting-maids only stared in surprise, though some tittered a bit till frowned on by the grand lady. Then one of them, again bowing, said, “Will Your Highness have on another gown before time for lessons? The masters will soon be here.”

Biddy, turning red and feeling very uncomfortable, faltered out, “Yes, mam. Bedad, and it’s sorry I am to be a-spoiling of this!” And she looked down shame-facedly at the purple velvet all dripping with milk and porridge.

At this, the waiting-maids could hardly keep from laughing outright,

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as they led her to a fine bedroom and put on her another velvet dress—this time a crimson one and, like the other, very stiff with embroidery and reaching nearly to the floor, which was the fashion for little girl Princesses.

Then they took her back to the big room, and again she sat on the throne-like chair, which was beginning to feel rather straight and hard, in spite of its rich carving and heavy cushions.

Presently in came the spelling-master—a solemn-looking man with a large book in his hand. At the sight of this Bidy was decidedly frightened, for she had never been to school a day in her life; there

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were no places in Ireland then where children who lived in cabins might be taught. "Now, Your Highness," said the spelling-master, opening the book and bowing as had the others, "will you deign to spell 'cat'?"

"Oh sir!" gasped Biddy. "Is it me that must be spelling of cat? 'Tis only priests, sir, that can read the mass-book, that can do hard things like that!"

The spelling-master looked perplexed, and, after talking a few minutes with the grand lady, the latter came and said respectfully, but rather sternly, "Your Highness, if you will not learn to spell, how then can you read? And then there are

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your music- and drawing-masters waiting.”

“Musha! Musha! ma’am!” cried Bidy in despair. “And is it all such things Princesses must be doing of? I—I didn’t know, ma’am, King’s daughters had to work the likes of that! Why, I’d rather—rather be a-tending of Peter!”

At Bidy’s speech the grand lady looked very stern indeed, and stared very hard; but she only said, “Very well, Your Highness. I will dismiss your masters for today. And what are your commands for the morning, in place of the lessons?”

Bidy was silent a while, and then she said faintly, “If you please,

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ma'am, I'd—I'd like to play, I would!"

The grand lady brightened up then, and said, "Does Your Highness mean to keep your music-master here and play on your harp?"

"Oh dear, no, ma'am!" answered Bidy, frightened again. "'Tis to play outdoors I'm meaning! Tag and ball it is, and games like Pat and I know!"

The grand lady stiffened up again, and, turning to the twelve waiting-maids, said coldly, "Conduct the Princess to the garden. She wishes to play ball and tag." And Bidy's cheeks burned, the way she said it.

She followed meekly as the wait-

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ing-maids led the way down a winding stair—which made her quite dizzy, as she had never before been on stairs—and out into a large garden. There were fountains in it, and very fine flowers; but the flowers were all in straight stiff beds and did not look as if meant to be picked. As Biddy gazed at them, she could not but think she liked the meadow ones better. Then nobody but herself knew how to play tag, and the waiting-maids looked very scornful when she tried to show them; and, when she wanted to run, her long heavy dress was terribly in her way; while, as for the gold slippers, they tripped her up so she tumbled down twice, and the wait-

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ing-maids laughed out loud at her. "Bedad!" moaned Bidy to herself. "'Tis the feel of the grass under my toes that I'm wanting!" For never had she worn shoes, except thick calfskin ones in winter, and she was quite unused to the high heels of slippers for Princesses. Then, too, she soon found that in the game of tag the waiting-maids never tagged *her*, because it was not considered proper for Princesses to be beaten in any game; and, of course, that took all the fun away.

Bidy soon tired of playing like that, and she sat down on a stone bench to think; though it was not very easy to think with twelve tittering waiting-maids standing stiffly

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behind her. Biddy could hear them, and the more they tittered the angrier she grew; till presently, in quite a rage, she tore off her lace cap and—I'm sorry to tell it, but she threw it down and stamped on it. Then she kicked off the golden slippers, and pulled off her fine silk stockings, and, running to a fountain near by, flung them all in; and then she sat on the edge of it and cried. "Och! Och!" she wailed, as the tears streamed down her cheeks. "If only ye were a wishing-spring and I could wish again!"

In a moment a sweet, tinkling little voice seemed to come from under a water-lily in the fountain, and then a tiny fairy crept out and sat

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on the big green leaf of the lily. It was the same little lady she had seen in the wishing-spring that morning. "There, there, child!" said the fairy, smiling kindly. "I have been watching you today; for I wondered how you would like being a Princess. If you want to wish again, you may."

"Oh, ma'am," cried Bidly eagerly, "I wish I was back in the Cabin again, and—and 'tis barefooted I'm wanting to go, and to be tending of Peter and feeding of the pig, and playing in the meadow with Pat—and never, *never* to be a Princess again so long as ever I live!"

And, of course, the good fairy made Bidly's wish come true, and

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she became a ragged, happy little girl as before; and, when they grew up, she forgot all about the King's son she had once wanted to marry, and married Pat instead; and of course, too, they lived happily ever after.

THE GOOD YEAR

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UPPER was over, the pewter porringers and platter put back on the dresser shelves, and the curtains drawn over the farmhouse windows so as to keep out the chill wind; for it was the very last of December, and in Norway the winter nights are always long and cold.

Grandfather was sitting on the big settle close to the hearth, and Arne and Olga had crept up, one on either side of him. It was the time when they loved to talk to him, or perhaps listen to a story or two before going to their queer little beds,

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which were built into the wall, like cupboards, their polished doors open now and shining in the fire-light.

Two red-cheeked apples were roasting on the hearth, and as the flames from the blazing logs leaped and flickered, they lighted up the brick oven beside the settle and the carved and painted rafters overhead. From these hung strands of onions, and dried herbs, and odd, flat loaves of bread, each with a hole through the middle and strung on a slender pole. Mingled with and half hiding these things, were the green holiday garlands of pine, which still decked the house. The firelight flickered also on the gay wooden

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cradle where baby Hilda lay sleeping, and on the deal table beyond, where stood a pretty fir-tree that had shed its Christmas gifts but was still bright with tinsel and paper flowers.

The children's father and mother had gone to the village church for the last service of the year, and as now Arne and Olga drew closer to Grandfather, they all sat dreaming a while, and then Arne spoke; "Grandfather," he said, "it is nearly another year, isn't it?"

"Yes, lad," answered Grandfather.

"And," went on Arne, "you must remember ever so many New Years?"

"Yes, indeed!" agreed Grand-

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father, with a half-sad smile; for he was very old and his hair was quite white. "Would you like me to tell you about some New Year I remember?"

"Oh yes, please do!" put in Olga, and Grandfather, stroking her yellow curls, began to think.

"Well, well," he said presently, "I will tell you about the one we village folk (you know I lived in the village then) called 'The Good Year.' That was long and long ago," he added, with a sigh. "I must have seen fifty others since that one." Then, brightening up, he went on: "It was the thirty-first of December, just like now, and at midnight the little New Year lay



“ THE LITTLE NEW YEAR LAY ROCKING IN HIS CRADLE UP
IN THE SKY ” ”

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rocking in his cradle up in the sky.”

“Was it like Hilda’s, with tulips painted on the rockers and blue-birds on the sides?” asked Olga.

“Why, yes,” said Grandfather, “I dare say it was, only finer. Maybe it was made of gold like the stars, or silver like the moon; I am not sure. But at any rate, suddenly the little New Year sat up listening. There was a great shrieking of whistles and ringing of church-bells. ‘*Boom! Boom!*’ drums were being beaten by the young men watching with the old bell-ringer up in the belfry, and everywhere rose a confused sound of shouting voices, though he could make out the words, ‘*Happy New*

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Year! Happy New Year! We wish you a happy New Year!

“The little New Year laughed merrily. ‘Ho! Ho!’ he cried. ‘It is time I was flying down there to earth. They seem to be giving me a hearty welcome, and hoping I will be happy. Well, I am sure I mean to be!’ And again he laughed, as flinging off his starry coverlid, he sprang from his cradle and began fluttering his pretty white wings, that glistened like the little wings one sees in pictures of baby angels.

“But before he could fly to the earth, two heavy objects thrust themselves, one in either hand. The first was a big, old-fashioned scythe, and the other an hour-glass, in which

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the golden-brown sand was already beginning to trickle from one half to the other.”

“Why did he have those things to carry?” asked Arne.

“That was what the little New Year wanted to know,” replied Grandfather. “He frowned, and tried to let go of them, but he could not. ‘Not so fast, young sir!’ said the scythe. ‘You must take me along!’ ”

“‘But why?’ asked the little New Year, in surprise.

“‘Because,’ answered the scythe, ‘all the years since the beginning of the world have carried me. You see, down there on earth a certain number of people must die every

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year, and it is your business once in a while to swing me, just as a mower cutting grass in the meadow; and when you do, the people will die, just as the grass and flowers wither away after the mowing.'

" 'But,' cried the little New Year, shrinking back, for he was a kindly little soul, 'I do not want to make anybody die! Why must I?'

" 'That I cannot tell,' answered the scythe, after a moment's pause. 'But it seems to be the way of the world, and you cannot escape it. However, when you reach the earth, you can put me down between whiles; for I know I am heavy to carry, and of course you mustn't

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be swinging me all the time, or there would be nobody left there.'

"The little New Year frowned again, but said no more. But when he looked at the hour-glass, he smiled. 'Oh,' he said, 'when I get to a good place, I will empty it out and make a fine sand pile to play in!'

" 'Indeed you will not!' said the hour-glass. 'You must take me along, for I am very important to you. My sand is divided into twelve parts, one for each month, and when they have all run from one half of me to the other, your time is up, and you must die, just like everybody else. My January sand is already trickling down, so

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you had better hurry up with your work.'

"'Dear me!' said the little New Year, looking a trifle blank, 'My baggage is surely not very cheerful! But never mind, perhaps in twelve months I shall be tired of tugging these things around, and quite ready to stop.' And with a brave little cry, 'Come on, January!' he plunged straight down to earth, a gust of white, sparkling snowflakes whirling around him as he went."

"Where did he land?" asked Arne.

"Why," said Grandfather, "that was the odd part of it. It was right in our village, which happened, to be just underneath his cradle."

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“Did you see him?” inquired Olga.

“No,” replied Grandfather. “Didn’t I tell you that he had on a cap that made him and his scythe and glass invisible to everybody but babies? You know babies always like each other, and so little New Years always smile when they see one. You just watch Hilda tomorrow and see if you don’t find her looking into the air and laughing as if she saw another baby. Of course,” added Grandfather, “I have lived through so many years, that once in a while, when perhaps their caps have tumbled off for a minute, I have caught a glimpse of them, but not often.

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“Well, as I was telling you, the little New Year came straight to our village. To be sure, he had to fly all over the world and see that it was January everywhere, and attend to all manner of affairs, but years are wonderfully quick about things, so he could do his work in a twinkling and still have a good deal of time to spend with us. I think he specially liked our village because it was so pretty and peaceful and was the first place he came to on earth. Of course, too, that first morning he felt very important, for everybody was going around, calling on each other, and talking about him, and eating sugar-cake and drinking elderberry wine in his honor.

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“The children all got out their sleds, some of them brand new from Santa Claus and with the red paint still fresh and bright, and how they all laughed and shouted! And all the while, though none of them knew it, the little New Year was romping with them. Sometimes when they dragged their sleds up hill, they wondered what made them so heavy, never dreaming that the little New Year had jumped on them; and often, when they thought it was passing sleigh-bells, it was really his merry, silvery laughter that they heard.”

“I should think he *would* have been pretty heavy to pull up hill

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with that big scythe and hour-glass!" said Olga.

"Well," said Grandfather, "he didn't carry the scythe all the time, but put it down whenever he could. Old Lars Anderson declared that as he came through the forest that day he saw a queer old-fashioned scythe hanging on an oak tree. But one never could be quite sure of what old Lars said, though of course the scythe might have been there and become visible when the little New Year let go of it.

"And it wasn't only the children the little New Year played with. When he got tired of romping with them, he flew to the pond at the edge of the village, where the young men

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and girls were skimming by on their shining skates. There, with his silvery laugh, he would tuck up his little white mantle, and sliding along in his little bare feet,—for he did not mind the cold—*pouf!* he would push against some flying couple who thought themselves the finest skaters in the world, and over they would tumble, wondering how it could possibly have happened! Sometimes he would mischievously put his hour-glass down in front of them, and *bump!* over they would go! But they were always well wrapped up in thick coats and furs, so nobody was hurt, and their peals of merry laughter only added to the fun.

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“Then in the long January evenings, when the young folks of the village would gather together and dance, and play blind-man’s-buff, and twirl-the-platter, and cut-the-oats, the little New Year would often be there playing with them, and nobody knew, only that then they always had the best times of all.

“When the January sand was all run out and February began, the New Year was no longer so little, but growing very fast. Still he frolicked with the children, and caused the snow that fell to be so very moist and soft that never were there finer snow-men than the boys and girls made. Often when they were rolling the big balls for these,

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they wondered that they grew so fast and that it was so easy to push them along. That was because the New Year was helping them. And then, when a snow-man was finished, and, running into the house, they would bring out bits of charred fagots from the hearth and make two black eyes for his round white face and perhaps find a clay pipe for his mouth, the New Year would laugh like a chime of sleigh-bells."

"The snow-man we made yesterday has eyes like that, and a pipe," said Arne, "only it was hard to make him stay together; the snow was so dry."

"Ah, ha!" said Grandfather, with a twinkle in his eye, "so that is what

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has become of my pipe? I missed it today.”

Arne reddened, “But Grandfather,” he said, “you know it was only your old pipe; we thought maybe, as it was holiday time, you would be smoking your good one.”

“To be sure,” said Grandfather, good-naturedly, though he really liked the old one best. “You may bring it to me now, Arne.”

The little boy slid from his seat and, running to a shelf, took down the pipe with a wonderful silver lid and two tassels of scarlet and green. Grandfather carefully filled it, and lighting it with a coal from the hearth, puffed slowly two or three times before he replied to Olga’s

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question, "But what else did the New Year do?"

"Well," he said presently, "he did a great many things. Sometimes he amused himself by piling up the snow on all the forest trees, and the thatched roofs in the village, and the gate-posts and well-sweeps till it looked as if the whole world was made of white flakes. But the prettiest thing of all that he did was to fly about at night and cover everything with ice, so that in the morning, when the sun shone, the brightness everywhere was like the dazzling light of millions of diamonds. Of course other years have done this also, and you children have seen these wonderful icy mornings, but

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never were there so many, or such magic ones, as in the time of The Good Year. And then, when the nights were clear and starry, he loved to get Jack Frost, and between them such beautiful white pictures as they painted on our village windows!”

“Did you see our windows today, Grandfather?” asked Olga. “One of them had a frost picture of a mountain and a river, and some houses, and a little pasture all full of woolly sheep!”

“Yes,” said Arne, “and we heated a copper penny at the hearth, and played that we burned down the houses when we held it on them and melted a hole to see through!”

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Grandfather smiled gently as he puffed slowly at his pipe, still thinking of The Good Year. Then he went on, "When March came with his blustering winds, The Good Year saw to it that they blew only the dead limbs from the forest trees, so there were always plenty of fagots and even the poorest village people could keep blazing fires on their hearths. Then, by and by, the April sands began to run; and The Good Year—for by this time people no longer called him the New Year, but had begun already to give him the name he afterward went by—breathed a warm breath over the earth, and '*Crack! Crack!*' the ice began to melt and break in the river

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and crash over the cataract in great glittering sheets. Then everywhere the buds started to swell, till *puff!* out burst the cherry blossoms, and, by and by, the pear and apple bloom.”

At this, “Oh!” said Olga, “I almost forgot our apples!” And, jumping down from the settle, she went to the dresser and taking two of the pewter porringers and putting into them the roasted apples, their red skins fairly bursting with savory juice, she gave one to Arne,—for Grandfather did not wish any—and with the other for herself, climbed back to her place. As the children slowly dipped their spoons into the porringers, enjoying their

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holiday treat, Grandfather went on, "The trees were a sight, the pink and white flowers so thick on every bough that there was hardly room for them to burst open. The village folk all said, 'See, what a wonderful year for fruit!' Then one day, when The Good Year was off attending to matters in a distant part of the world, along came Jack Frost meaning to play an evil trick.

"He had grown jealous of hearing The Good Year praised, and determined to do something to injure his fair name. He had made up his mind to nip all the pretty blossoms so they could not grow, and no one that season would have any pears or apples or cherries. At dusk of that

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day all the village knew that he had come, for he made the air so cold; and then, when the stars began to twinkle, they were in despair, because Jack Frost always chooses starry nights for his work.

“But just as he was about to blight all the pink and white trees, The Good Year came flying back, and seizing him by his shining coat,—it looked like white wool, but was all made of hoar-frost—he shook him soundly. ‘Jack Frost,’ he said, ‘I thought you were my friend; but you are a wicked fellow to slip here while I was away, and try to do this evil deed! It is all right for you to make the grass and trees sparkle on autumn mornings and to paint the

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window-panes in winter, but you know very well you have no business to show yourself when the April sand is running in my hour-glass, and you shall not spoil my village people's fruit-trees! Now go away! And with that he shook him again, and then putting him down, he swayed his hour-glass so the April sand was stirred, and at once a cloud came and a warm rain began to fall, and Jack Frost ran away as fast as he could, for fear he would melt, and he dared not show himself again till autumn."

"I am glad Jack Frost didn't nip our apple-tree this year!" said Arne, as he dipped up the last spoonful from his porringer. "You know he

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did the spring before, Grandfather, and we had no apples.”

“Yes,” said Grandfather, “I remember. After The Good Year chased him away, he was afraid to show himself in the spring for a long time. Then came some bad years, who let him do as he pleased, and since then he has been growing tricky again, and one never knows just what he will do.”

“Go on about The Good Year,” said Olga, as she put down the porringers.

“Well, let me see,” said Grandfather. “Oh yes, it was the May sand that soon began to run, and the woods were carpeted with big, blue violets on long pale green stems,

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and golden cuckoo-buds, and white wind-flowers, and the children filled their May-baskets and hung them on everybody's door. Then they went to the green and sang and danced around the May-pole which the village folk had raised and trimmed with gay garlands. And I remember how pretty little Elsa, the apothecary's daughter, looked as she danced in her white sprigged frock and red shoes; and how Hendrick, the parson's little boy, held her hand tightly all the while and danced with her and looked at her as if he thought her sweeter than a Christmas sugar-plum! That was a great Maytime for fairy rings, too; every day the big meadow would be

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full of the tall circles of deep green grass showing where the fairies had danced by moonlight; and you know when the fairies dance a great deal it always means a lucky season.”

“I wish I could see some fairies!” said Olga wistfully.

“Bless me!” cried Grandfather, in surprise. “Have you never? Why, I had seen a number when I was no bigger than you. Of course I can’t see them now, because it’s only to children the fairies ever show themselves.”

“I saw one last summer,” said Arne.

“Where?” asked Olga, enviously.

“It was one day when I was going through the forest,” answered Arne,

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“and under a big hemlock tree there was a tuft of moss and something bright that I thought was some kind of a flower I had never seen before. But when I came nearer, I saw it was a fairy sitting in a little spot of sunlight and singing all to himself.”

“How big was he?” asked Olga.

“Why, I should think he would have been about half as high as my knee if he had stood up, and he had on a little green suit with a red cap and mantle. In a minute he spied me, and jumped away and hid under a toad-stool, and I went on and pretended not to see him, for I didn’t want to frighten him.”

“That was right,” said Grand-

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father, "for fairies are generally kind, friendly little creatures, and it would be a pity to frighten them. It is pretty to see them; and that fairy of yours, Arne, reminds me of one I saw when I was about your size. This one was sitting in the forest, too, only he was dressed all in sky-blue, and what do you suppose he was doing?"

"I don't know," said Arne.

"Well," said Grandfather, "a white butterfly was resting on his knee, and the fairy had a dewy buttercup in one hand, and a little wisp of grass like a paint-brush in the other. With this he was mixing the golden powder in the heart of the buttercup with the drops of dew and

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painting the butterfly's wings a beautiful bright yellow. I knew then where the pretty yellow butterflies came from."

"Do you think the fairies paint all the butterflies?" asked Olga.

"I have no doubt of it," answered Grandfather. And then, as the little wreaths of smoke floated upward from his pipe, he went on. "But I haven't finished yet about The Good Year. You know his June sand was beginning to run and he was fairly well grown by that time; for years have to grow very fast, as they are always quite old at the end of the twelve months. So, as the year had passed his childhood, he was more interested in the doings

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of the young people than of the boys and girls as he had been at first.

“When the roses were all in bloom and midsummer night came, there was a full moon, and all the young folks went to dance on the village green where the May-pole had been. It was a fine sight, the girls looking so handsome in their holiday bodices and starched petticoats, and their gay flowered kerchiefs and embroidered aprons; and the young men in their velvet jackets and knee breeches with silver braid and buttons.

“The Good Year watched them for a while, and then he quietly flew over to the church and into the belfry where the big bell was hanging.

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‘My friend,’ he said, ‘you have a fine deep voice, and I remember how musically you rang the night I was born. And I have heard you calling the people to church on Sundays. But are there not other things for which you ring?’

“‘Yes,’ answered the bell, slowly and softly, ‘I sometimes toll for funerals.’

“‘No, no!’ cried The Good Year quickly, with a sudden frown, ‘that is not what I mean! You shall not toll again so long as I live! You know I have never used my scythe in this village, and I never shall.’

“And didn’t he, Grandfather?” asked Arne, opening his eyes.

“No,” said Grandfather, “that

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was the strange thing! Not a single person in the village died that whole year! Such a thing has never happened before or since, and wasn't that reason enough to call him 'The Good Year'? Of course he had to use his scythe somewhere in the world, but it seemed he could not bear to harm any one in our village. So when he said to the bell that he would not hear it toll, it was dumb with amazement, but soon recovered itself and tinkled, as with soft laughter, when he asked again, 'But is there not something else for which you ring?'

" 'To be sure,' answered the bell, 'there are weddings!'

" 'That is it!' said The Good Year,

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in a pleased tone. 'I want to hear you peal for a wedding. Is it possible that none of those handsome young people down there on the green are thinking of such a thing?'

"'Of course they are!' answered the bell. 'I know of several young couples who would like nothing better. But none of them are ready yet to marry, except Jan Viborg down there—that tall, awkward fellow in the green jacket—and Frieda, the school-master's daughter,—he is dancing with her now; she is the prettiest girl in the village'—

"*Jan Viborg, and Frieda?*" interrupted Olga, sitting up straight. "Why, Grandfather, that was *your*

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name, and—and *Grandmother's!*”

“Well, child,” went on Grandfather, with a dreamy smile, “perhaps it was,—but the bell wasn't through talking. ‘Jan,’ it said, ‘has a small farm at the edge of the village, and he has built a little wooden house with his own hands, and has carved its beams and rafters and door-posts, and he has made carved chairs, and a bench, and table, and a clothes-press and dresser all ready to begin housekeeping; and Frieda's linen-chest is filled with fine things of her own spinning and weaving, and her bridal crown and silver necklace are all ready, and a wonderful embroidered apron for her wedding day, and yet they have

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not married though they have been betrothed these three years.'

" 'What is the matter?' asked The Good Year.

" 'Well,' answered the bell, 'Jan's little farm is not quite paid for, and for two years the harvest has failed so he could not free the debt, and they have been afraid to marry till they knew this summer's harvest would be plentiful.'

" 'Oh,' said The Good Year, 'if that is all that troubles them, they need have no fear; I will see to the harvest.' With that, he slyly caught hold of the bell-rope and softly rang a joyous peal or two, as for a wedding.

"The young folks down on the

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green heard it, and stopped dancing, to listen. ‘Hark!’ they said, ‘it must be the midsummer fairies ringing the bell!’ And then they laughed and chattered of the pranks the fairies play on midsummer night,—but Jan and Frieda took it for a luck sign; they pressed each other’s hands and looked into each other’s faces, and—well—never mind what they said, but all fear about the debt and the harvest vanished, and it was settled the church-bell should really peal for a wedding in a week’s time.”

“And did they have it then?” asked Arne.

“Yes, indeed!” said Grandfather. “And never was there so beautiful

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a bride as Frieda, or so proud and happy a bridegroom as Jan."

Grandfather still spoke of himself that way, for looking back so many years to his own youth, it seemed to him almost like talking of some one else:

"You know, Grandfather," said Olga, "Mother keeps Grandmother Frieda's bridal crown and necklace and embroidered apron in the chest yonder, and she says when I grow up and am married, I am to wear them, just as she and Grandmother did on their wedding days."

But Grandfather did not hear; his thoughts had flown back to the time, scarcely more than a twelvemonth from his own wedding, when there

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came a cruel year who swung his scythe in the happy village, till at last the church-bell tolled for beautiful Frieda's funeral, and Grandfather was left with her little baby girl, who was to grow up and be the mother of Arne and Olga.

Grandfather's eyes were misty with tears, but, straightening up, he hastily brushed them away so the children might not see them; and then stirring the ashes of his pipe, which he had quite forgotten for a while, with a brave smile he went on. "Of course Frieda and Jan had a fine wedding feast for the village folk, and there was music and dancing all day long. The little chil-

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dren, too, played and frolicked and enjoyed it all, and I must tell you what happened the very next day. You remember I told you how Hendrick, the parson's son, and Elsa, the apothecary's daughter, danced together around the Maypole? Well, Hendrick was eight years old and Elsa six, and they had been sweethearts ever since they could toddle. So the day after the wedding they decided they would like to be married too. The parson's children had a playhouse in the corner of the garden, and Hendrick said they could live in that; then Elsa ran to her home and filled the pockets of her little apron with sugar buns which she said would do

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for their wedding cake, and they were all ready.

“But when Hendrick went in to ask his father to marry them, the parson only laughed and told him to run out and play. Of course Hendrick was angry,” went on Grandfather, smiling a bit to himself, “but Elsa told him not to mind it, for she had an uncle who was a parson and lived in the next village, only ten miles away. She said he always gave them sugar-plums at Christmas time and told them pretty stories, and she was quite sure he would marry them and not make fun of them. So, taking hold of hands, the poor little things set out.

“Elsa did not know the way, only

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that they must cross the river at the edge of the village. When they reached it, Hendrick looked about for a boat, and saw an old skiff, with one oar in it, tied to a tree on the bank. He managed to unfasten it, and they both climbed in and Hendrick tried to lift the oar; but he could do nothing with it, and the skiff began to drift down the river."

"*But the cataract, Grandfather?*" interrupted Olga. "*They might go over it!*"

"Yes," said Grandfather, gravely, "that was just the trouble, for it would have been certain death. The skiff kept drifting nearer and nearer, and soon the children heard the roar of the falling water, and

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they were terribly frightened. Elsa began to scream, and a woodcutter in the forest beyond heard her, and throwing down his ax, he hurried toward the river. He was terror stricken when he saw the skiff with the two helpless children, for he had no boat, and even if he had had one, it seemed impossible to save them.

“But just when the woodcutter had given up hope, The Good Year, who had been looking after the grain fields beyond the forest, came flying along and saw the danger.”

“What did he do?” asked Arne.

“Why,” replied Grandfather, “he quickly whirled his hour-glass round and round, just as he did when he caught Jack Frost, only

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faster; and the June sand, which was running in a smooth stream, suddenly twisted and fell all topsyturvy, and immediately a great funnel-like black cloud rolled up in the sky and a fierce blast of wind rushed up the river. Stronger and stronger it blew, till, with the force of a hurricane, catching the little skiff as if it were an egg-shell, it tossed it up on the bank and out jumped the children, not two yards from the brink of the cataract! The wood-cutter gathered them in his arms and carried them all the way home, though they were a good load. He said that when the wind blew along the river, the mist from the cataract rose like two great white wings;—

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he did not know it, but they were the wings of the The Good Year.”

“I suppose his invisible cap came off when he was twisting the hour-glass,” said Olga, “so the wood-cutter could see the wings.”

“I dare say that was the way of it,” said Grandfather.

“Did Hendrick and Elsa ever get married?” went on the little girl.

“To be sure!” answered Grandfather. “But that was years after, when they grew up, and a handsome young couple they were.”

“Did The Good Year keep his promise about the harvest?” asked Arne.

“Of course he kept his promise,” said Grandfather. “All through

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July and August the wheat and oats and barley grew and ripened, till the fields looked like gold and silver. When the sun shone too hot, The Good Year shook his hour-glass till showers came, and there was no burning drought as in the bad years before. In the autumn, when everything from all the fields and orchards was gathered, and the village folk trimmed the church for the harvest festival, never were seen such golden sheaves or such red-cheeked apples; and everybody thanked the good God for sending them such a wonderful year. And not only was there plenty for the village, but plenty for the forest creatures, too; so the wolves were

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satisfied to stay in their hiding places and did not trouble us.”

“Why, Grandfather,” said Arne, with round eyes, “would they come out of the forest then?”

“Indeed they would!” answered Grandfather. “In those days, when their food was scarce, they would often come at night and rob our sheep-folds; and sometimes, when things were very bad with them, they would even venture boldly into the village in broad daylight.”

“Did you ever see one do that?” asked Olga.

“No,” said Grandfather, “I didn’t see it myself, but I remember well one day when it happened. It was the time of a bad year, and little Lief,

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the shop-keeper's son, was playing in the door-yard of their cottage, which was on the edge of the village, when suddenly a gaunt, hungry wolf came running from the forest, and seizing little Lief's jacket in his teeth, was about to carry him off. But little Lief screamed so loud that his elder brother heard him, and hurrying out with a big cudgel bravely drove away the wolf. Little Lief was so frightened that it was many weeks before he would play outdoors again, and then he never would go alone. Indeed, all the rest of that year, the village people were afraid to let their children out of their sight."

Arne and Olga each drew a long

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breath, and "Oh!" cried Olga, "I should think you *would* have been glad of a Good Year that kept the wolves away!"

Grandfather puffed at his pipe in silence for a few minutes, and then he said, "But he was growing old and tired, and by the time the December sand began to run, his hair and long beard were as white as his mantle, and every day the scythe and hour-glass seemed to be heavier to carry. Of course the things he must look after over all the world were a great care to him, and though he tried hard, he could not please everybody, especially as now and then he was obliged to swing the great scythe. But he was

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pleased when he heard the people of our village call him 'The Good Year'; he would smile to himself, and say how glad he was that he had been able at least to make this little place happy. There was only one thing more he wanted to see, and that was that we had a merry Christmas. 'After that,' he would say to himself, 'when my time is up, I shall be quite ready and willing to go.' "

"And did you have a fine Christmas? So fine as ours?" asked Arne.

"Indeed, yes!" answered Grandfather, "the merriest ever seen! The harvest had been so bountiful, that the week before Christmas when we went to put up our sheaves

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of oats and barley for the birds, it wasn't only to the cottage roofs we fastened them, as you children did, but we tied them, besides, in a golden fringe all around the eaves, and clusters nodded from even the fence posts; and the snow-birds came in great flocks for their holiday feast. And there was not a house in the village but had its Yule-log wound with greens, and a Christmas tree all trimmed with paper flowers and gay tinsel."

"I don't believe they were any prettier than ours!" said Olga, looking toward the table where the fir-tree twinkled in the fire-light.

"No, no, child, perhaps not," said

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Grandfather, "only everybody had one; and you know this year some folks in the village are too poor to trim a tree. And then how we danced and sang and feasted!" he went on, his mind, as old people's are apt to do, still dwelling on the golden past.

"Did you have boiled fish and roast goose, like we have on Christmas?" asked Olga again.

"Yes," answered Grandfather, "and fresh cinnamon bread, and sweet cheeses, and sugar cake, and ale and nuts and red apples. And then, in the evening, two little boys went around singing pretty carols, just as you and Svend Hardin did this year, Arne. Little Hendrick,

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the parson's son was one, and I forget the other."

"Were they dressed in white, like we were, and did they carry a star lantern and dolls?" interrupted Arne.

"Yes," said Grandfather, "they wore little white suits, and Hendrick carried a lantern shaped like a star, in memory of the Star of Bethlehem, and the other little boy held two dolls dressed to represent the blessed Christ-child and his Mother, and the lads sang so sweetly,—though not sweeter than you did, Arne," added Grandfather, patting his hair—"and everybody praised them and gave them cakes and sugar-plums.

"When the happy Christmas was

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over, The Good Year smiled contentedly; his last wish had been fulfilled and he was quite satisfied to go, for he knew the December sands were almost run. But the village people mourned about it. They said he had made them so happy, they wished he would never fly away. I think we dreaded the New Year a bit, for one never knows what sorrows the new-comer may have in store.

“When The Good Year saw that there was only a tiny trickle of sand left in the upper half of his hour-glass, he folded his white mantle about him and put down the scythe, which he knew he would soon be rid of; and we village folk went to

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the church, where your father and mother are now, to watch until midnight, just as they are doing.

“After the parson had finished the service, we all sat quietly till from the belfry came the first stroke of twelve, and the young men up there with the old bell-ringer began to beat on their drums.

“Then we opened the door, and looked out across the snowy fields. Far away a white mist seemed to be rising. Up and up it floated, higher and higher. Some thought they could see in it two shining white wings, others a trailing white mantle, but nobody could tell for certain. Higher and higher it rose, drifting lightly across the moon,

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and then beyond a cluster of golden stars, till at last it vanished in the deep blue midnight sky. So it was that The Good Year passed away from earth.”

When he had finished the story, Grandfather shut the silver lid of his holiday pipe and smoothed its gay tassels; then, leaning his head back on the settle, he closed his eyes; Arne and Olga crept up closer, nestling at either side of him, and soon all three were fast asleep. They slept so soundly that they did not hear when the bell struck for midnight, nor the booming of the New Year's drums. Nor did they hear the merry tinkling of the little silver bells as presently the sleighs

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went flying by, taking the farmer folk to their homes. Indeed, they only wakened when the door opened and in came the father and mother, shaking off a flurry of twinkling snowflakes as they entered, and calling out, "*A Happy New Year! A Happy, Happy New Year!*"

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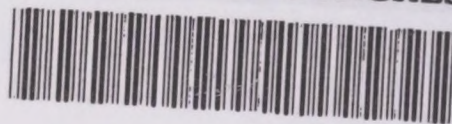


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