



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Candle In The Forest

The Small Girl's mother was saying, "The onions will be silver, and the carrots will be gold——"

"And the potatoes will be ivory," said the Small Girl, and they laughed together.

The Small Girl's mother had a big white bowl in her lap, and she was cutting up vegetables. The onions were the hardest, because one cried a little over them.

"But our tears will be pearls," said the Small Girl's mother, and they laughed at that and dried their eyes, and found the carrots much easier, and the potatoes the easiest of all.

Then the Next-Door-Neighbor came in and said, "What are you doing?"

"We are making a beefsteak pie for our Christmas dinner," said the Small Girl's mother.

"And the onions are silver, and the carrots gold, and the potatoes ivory," said the Small Girl.

"I am sure I don't know what you are talking about," said the Next-Door-Neighbor. "We are going to have turkey for Christmas, and oysters, and cranberries and celery."

The Small Girl laughed and clapped her hands. "But we are going to have a Christmas pie—and the onions are silver and the carrots gold——"

"You said that once," said the Next-Door-Neighbor, "and I should think you'd know they weren't anything of the kind."

"But they are," said the Small Girl, all shining eyes and rosy cheeks.

"Run along, darling," said the Small Girl's mother, "and find poor Pussy-Purr-up. He's out in the cold. And you can put on your red sweater and red cap."

So the Small Girl hopped away like a happy robin, and the Next-Door-Neighbor said,

"She is old enough to know that onions aren't silver."

"But they are," said the Small Girl's mother, "and the carrots are gold and the potatoes are——"

The Next-Door-Neighbor's face was flaming. "If you say that again, I'll scream. It

sounds silly to me.”

“But it isn’t in the least silly,” said the Small Girl’s mother, and her eyes were as blue as sapphires, and as clear as the sea; “it is sensible. When people are poor, they have to make the most of little things. And we’ll have only a pound of steak in our pie, but the onions will be silver——”

The lips of the Next-Door-Neighbor were folded in a thin line. “If you had acted like a sensible creature, I shouldn’t have asked you for the rent.”

The Small Girl’s mother was silent for a moment, then she said: “I am sorry—it ought to be sensible to make the best of things.”

“Well,” said the Next-Door-Neighbor, sitting down in a chair with a very stiff back, “a beefsteak pie is a beefsteak pie. And I wouldn’t teach a child to call it anything else.”

“I haven’t taught her to call it anything else. I was only trying to make her feel that it was something fine and splendid for Christmas day, so I said that the onions were silver——”

“Don’t say that again,” snapped the Next-Door-Neighbor, “and I want the rent as soon as possible.”

With that, she flung up her head and marched out of the front door, and it slammed behind her and made wild echoes in the little house.

And the Small Girl’s mother stood there alone in the middle of the floor, and her eyes were like the sea in a storm.

But presently the door opened, and the Small Girl, looking like a red-breast robin, hopped in, and after her came a great black cat with his tail in the air, and he said “Purr-up,” which gave him his name.

And the Small Girl said out of the things she had been thinking, “Mother, why don’t we have turkey?”

The clear look came back into the eyes of the Small Girl’s mother, and she said, “Because we are content.”

And the Small Girl said, “What is ‘content’?”

And her mother said: “It is making the best of what God gives us. And our best for Christmas day, my darling, is a beefsteak pie.”

So she kissed the Small Girl, and they finished peeling the vegetables, and then they put them with the pound of steak to simmer on the back of the stove.

After that, the Small Girl had her supper of bread and milk, and Pussy-Purr-up had milk in a saucer on the hearth, and the Small Girl climbed up in her mother’s

lap and said,

“Tell me a story.”

But the Small Girl’s mother said, “Won’t it be nicer to talk about Christmas presents?”

And the Small Girl sat up and said, “Let’s.”

And the mother said, “Let’s tell each other what we’d rather have in the whole wide world——”

“Oh, let’s,” said the Small Girl. “And I’ll tell you first that I want a doll—and I want it to have a pink dress—and I want it to have eyes that open and shut—and I want it to have shoes and stockings—and I want it to have curly hair——”

She had to stop, because she didn’t have any breath left in her body, and when she got her breath back, she said, “Now, what do you want, Mother—more than anything else in the whole wide world?”

“Well,” said her mother, “I want a chocolate mouse.”

“Oh,” said the Small Girl scornfully, “I shouldn’t think you’d want that.”

“Why not?”

“Because a chocolate mouse—why, a chocolate mouse isn’t anything.”

“Oh, yes, it is,” said the Small Girl’s mother. “A chocolate mouse is Dickory Dock, and Pussy-Cat-Pussy-Cat-Where-Have-You-Been—and it’s Three-Blind-Mice—and it’s A-Frog-He-Would-a-Wooing-Go—and it’s——”

The Small Girl’s eyes were dancing. “Oh, tell me about it——”

And her mother said: “Well, the mouse is Dickory-Dock ran up the clock, and the mouse in Pussy-Cat-Pussy-Cat was frightened under a chair, and the mice in Three-Blind-Mice ran after the farmer’s wife, and the mouse in A-Frog-He-Would-a-Wooing-Go went down the throat of the crow——”

And the Small Girl said, “Could a chocolate mouse do all that?”

“Well,” said the Small Girl’s mother, “we could put him on the clock, and under a chair, and cut his tail off with a carving knife, and at the very last we could eat him up like a crow.”

The Small Girl shivered deliciously. “And he wouldn’t be a real mouse?”

“No, just a chocolate one, with cream inside.”

“Do you think I’ll get one for Christmas?”

“I’m not sure.”

"Would he be nicer than a doll?"

The Small Girl's mother hesitated, then told the truth. "My darling—Mother saved up the money for a doll, but the Next-Door-Neighbor wants the rent."

"Hasn't Daddy any more money?"

"Poor Daddy has been sick so long."

"But he's well now."

"I know. But he has to pay money for doctors, and money for medicine, and money for your red sweater, and money for milk for Pussy-Purr-up, and money for our beefsteak pie."

"The Boy-Next-Door says we're poor, Mother."

"We are rich, my darling. We have love, and each other, and Pussy-Purr-up——"

"His mother won't let him have a cat," said the Small Girl, with her mind still on the Boy-Next-Door. "But he's going to have a radio."

"Would you rather have a radio than Pussy-Purr-up?"

The Small Girl gave a crow of derision. "I'd rather have Pussy-Purr-up than anything else in the whole wide world."

At that, the great cat, who had been sitting on the hearth with his paws tucked under him and his eyes like moons, stretched out his satin-shining length, and jumped up on the arm of the chair beside the Small Girl and her mother, and began to sing a song that was like a mill-wheel away off. He purred so long and so loud that at last the Small Girl grew drowsy.

"Tell me some more about the chocolate mouse," she said, and nodded, and slept.

The Small Girl's mother carried her into another room, put her to bed, and came back to the kitchen—and it was full of shadows.

But she did not let herself sit among them. She wrapped herself in a great cape and went out into the cold dusk, with a sweep of wind; heavy clouds overhead: and a band of dull orange showing back of the trees, where the sun had burned down.

She went straight from her little house to the big house of the Next-Door-Neighbor and rang the bell at the back entrance. A maid let her into the kitchen, and there was the Next-Door-Neighbor, and the two women who worked for her, and a daughter-in-law who had come to spend Christmas. The great range was glowing, and things were simmering, and things were stewing, and things were steaming, and things were baking, and things were boiling, and things were

broiling, and there was the fragrance of a thousand delicious dishes in the air.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said: "We are trying to get as much done as possible to-night. We are having twelve people for Christmas dinner to-morrow."

And the Daughter-in-Law, who was all dressed up and had an apron tied about her, said in a sharp voice, "I can't see why you don't let your maids work for you."

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said: "I have always worked. There is no excuse for laziness."

And the Daughter-in-Law said: "I'm not lazy, if that's what you mean. And we'll never have any dinner if I have to cook it," and away she went out of the kitchen with tears of rage in her eyes.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor said, "If she hadn't gone when she did, I should have told her to go," and there was rage in her eyes but no tears.

She took her hands out of the pan of breadcrumbs and sage, which she was mixing for the stuffing, and said to the Small Girl's mother,

"Did you come to pay the rent?"

The Small Girl's mother handed her the money, and the Next-Door-Neighbor went upstairs to write a receipt. Nobody asked the Small Girl's mother to sit down, so she stood in the middle of the floor and sniffed the entrancing fragrances, and looked at the mountain of food which would have served her small family for a month.

While she waited, the Boy-Next-Door came in and he said, "Are you the Small Girl's mother?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to have a tree?"

"Yes."

"Do you want to see mine?"

"It would be wonderful."

So he led her down a long passage to a great room, and there was a tree which touched the ceiling, and on the very top branches and on all the other branches were myriads of little lights which shone like stars, and there were gold balls and silver ones, and gold bells and silver ones, and red and blue and green balls, and red and blue and green bells—and under the tree and on it were toys for boys and toys for girls, and one of the toys was a doll in a pink dress!

At that the heart of the Small Girl's mother tightened, and she was glad she wasn't a thief, or she would have snatched at the pink doll when the boy wasn't looking, and hidden it under her cape, and run away with it!

The Boy-Next-Door was saying: "It's the finest tree anybody has around here. But Dad and Mother don't know that I've seen it."

"Oh, don't they?" said the Small Girl's mother.

"No," said the Boy-Next-Door, with a wide grin, "and it's fun to fool 'em."

"Is it?" said the Small Girl's mother. "Now, do you know, I should think the very nicest thing in the whole wide world would be not to have seen the tree."

The Boy-Next-Door stared and said, "Why?"

"Because," said the Small Girl's mother, "the nicest thing in the world would be to have somebody tie a handkerchief around your eyes, as tight, as tight, and then to have somebody take your hand and lead you in and out and in and out and in and out, until you didn't know where you were, and then to have them untie the handkerchief—and there would be the tree—all shining and splendid——"

She stopped, but her singing voice seemed to echo and re-echo in the great room.

The boy's staring eyes had a new look in them. "Did anybody ever tie a handkerchief over your eyes?"

"Oh, yes——"

"And lead you in and out, and in and out?"

"Yes."

"Well, nobody does things like that in our house. They think it's silly."

The Small Girl's mother laughed, and her laugh tinkled like a bell. "Do you think it is silly?"

He was eager. "No, I don't."

She held out her hand to him. "Will you come and see our tree?"

"To-night?"

"No, to-morrow morning—early."

"Before breakfast?"

She nodded.

"Gee, I'd like it."

So that was a bargain, with a quick squeeze of their hands on it. And the Small Girl's mother went back to the kitchen, and the Next-Door-Neighbor came down with the receipt, and the Small Girl's mother went out of the back door and found that the orange band which had burned on the horizon was gone, and that there was just the wind and the sighing of the trees.

Two men passed her on the brick walk which led to the house, and one of the men was saying:

"If you'd only be fair to me, Father."

And the other man said, "All you want of me is money."

"You taught me that, Father."

"Blame it on me——"

"You are to blame. You and Mother—did you ever show me the finer things?"

Their angry voices seemed to beat against the noise of the wind and the sighing trees, so that the Small Girl's mother shivered, and drew her cape around her, and ran on as fast as she could to her little house.

There were all the shadows to meet her, but she did not sit among them. She made coffee and a dish of milk toast, and set the toast in the oven to keep hot, and then she stood at the window watching. At last she saw through the darkness what looked like a star low down, and she knew that the star was a lantern, and she ran and opened the door wide.

And her young husband set the lantern down on the threshold, and took her in his arms, and said, "The sight of you is more than food and drink."

When he said that, she knew he had had a hard day, but her heart leaped because she knew that what he had said of her was true.

Then they went into the house together, and she set the food before him. And that he might forget his hard day, she told him of her own. And when she came to the part about the Next-Door-Neighbor and the rent, she said,

"I am telling you this because it has a happy ending."

And he put his hands over hers and said, "Everything with you has a happy ending."

"Well, this is a happy ending," said the Small Girl's mother, with all the sapphires in her eyes emphasizing it. "Because when I went over to pay the rent I was feeling how poor we were, and wishing that I had a pink doll for baby, and books for you, and—and—and a magic carpet to carry us away from work and worry."

And then I went into the kitchen of the big house, and there was everything delicious and delectable, and then I went into the parlor and saw the tree—with everything hanging on it that was glittering and gorgeous—and then I came home,” her breath was quick and her lips smiling, “I came home—and I was glad I lived in my little house.”

“What made you glad, dearest?”

“Oh, love is here; and hate is there, and a boy’s deceit, and a man’s injustice. They were saying sharp things to each other—and—and—their dinner will be a—stalled ox—And in my little house is the faith of a child in the goodness of God, and the bravery of a man who fought for his country——”

She was in his arms now.

“And the blessing of a woman who has never known defeat.” His voice broke on the words.

In that moment it seemed as if the wind stopped blowing, and as if the trees stopped sighing, and as if there was the sound of a heavenly host singing——



The Small Girl’s mother and the Small Girl’s father sat up very late that night. They popped a great bowlful of crisp snowy corn and made it into balls. They boiled sugar and molasses, and cracked nuts, and made candy of them. They cut funny little Christmas fairies out of paper and painted their jackets bright red, with round silver buttons of the tinfoil that came on a cream cheese. And then they put the balls and the candy and the painted fairies and a long red candle in a big basket, and set it away. And the Small Girl’s mother brought out the chocolate mouse.

“We will put this on the clock,” she said, “where her eyes will rest on it the first thing in the morning.”

So they put it there, and it seemed as natural as life, so that Pussy-Purr-up positively licked his chops and sat in front of the clock as if to keep his eye on the chocolate mouse.

And the Small Girl’s mother said, “She was lovely about giving up the doll, and she will love the tree.”

“We’ll have to get up very early,” said the Small Girl’s father.

“And you’ll have to run ahead and light the candle.”

Well, they got up before dawn the next morning, and so did the Boy-Next-Door. He was there on the step, waiting, blowing his hands and beating them quite like

the poor little boys in a Christmas story, who haven't any mittens.

But he wasn't a poor little boy, and he had so many pairs of fur-trimmed gloves that he didn't know what to do with them, but he had left the house in such a hurry that he had forgotten to put them on.

So there he stood on the front step of the little house, blowing on his hands and beating them. And it was dark, with a sort of pale shine in the heavens, which didn't seem to come from the stars or to herald the dawn; it was just a mystical silver glow that set the boy's heart to beating.

He had never been out alone like this. He had always stayed in his warm bed until somebody called him, and then he had waited until they called again, and then he had dressed and gone down to breakfast, where his father scolded because he was late, and his mother scolded because he ate too fast. But this day had begun with adventure, and for the first time, under that silver sky, he felt the thrill of it.

Then suddenly some one came around the corner—some one tall and thin, with a cap on his head and an empty basket in his hands.

"Hello," he said. "A Merry Christmas."

It was the Small Girl's father, and he put the key in the lock, and went in, and turned on a light, and there was the table set for four.

And the Small Girl's father said: "You see we have set a place for you. We must eat something before we go out."

And the Boy said: "Are we going out? I came to see the tree."

"We are going out to see the tree."

Before the Boy-Next-Door could ask any questions, the Small Girl's mother appeared with her finger on her lips and said: "Sh-sh," and then she began to recite in a hushed voice,

"Hickory-Dickory-Dock——"

Then there was a little cry and the sound of dancing feet, and the Small Girl in a red dressing-gown came flying in.

"Oh, Mother, Mother, the mouse is on the clock. The mouse is on the clock."

Well, it seemed to the Boy-Next-Door that he had never seen anything so exciting as the things that followed. The chocolate mouse went up the clock and under the chair—and would have had its tail cut off except that the Small Girl begged to save it.

"I want to keep it as it is, Mother."

And playing this game as if it were the most important thing in the whole wide world were the Small Girl's mother and the Small Girl's father, all laughing and flushed, and chanting the quaint old words to the quaint old music.

The Boy-Next-Door held his breath for fear he would wake up from this entrancing dream and find himself in his own big house, alone in his puffy bed, or eating breakfast with his stodgy parents who had never played with him in his life. He found himself laughing too, and flushed and happy, and trying to sing in his funny boy's voice,

"Heigh-o, says Anthony Rowley!"

The Small Girl absolutely refused to eat the mouse. "He's my darling Christmas mouse, Mother."

So her mother said, "Well, I'll put him on the clock again, where Pussy-Purr-up can't get him while we are out."

"Oh, are we going out?" said the Small Girl, round-eyed.

"Yes."

"Where are we going?"

"To find Christmas."

That was all the Small Girl's mother would tell. So they had breakfast, and everything tasted perfectly delicious to the Boy-Next-Door. But first they bowed their heads, and the Small Girl's father said,

"Dear Christ-Child, on this Christmas morning, bless these children, and help us all to keep our hearts young and full of love for Thee."

The Boy-Next-Door, when he lifted his head, had a funny feeling as if he wanted to cry, and yet it was a lovely feeling, all warm and comfortable.

For breakfast they each had a great baked apple, and great slices of sweet bread and butter, and great glasses of milk, and as soon as they had finished, away they went, out of the door and down into the wood back of the house, and when they were deep in the wood, the Small Girl's father took out of his pocket a little flute and began to play, and he played thin piping tunes that went flitting around among the trees, and the Small Girl hummed the tunes, and her mother hummed the tunes until it sounded like singing bees, and their feet fairly danced, and the boy found himself humming and dancing with them.

Then suddenly the piping ceased, and a hush fell over the wood. It was so still that they could almost hear each other breathe—so still that when a light flamed suddenly in that open space it burned without a flicker.

The light came from a red candle that was set in the top of a small living tree. It was the only light on the tree, but it showed the snowy balls, and the small red fairies whose coats had silver buttons.

"It's our tree, my darling," he heard the Small Girl's mother saying.

Suddenly it seemed to the boy that his heart would burst in his breast.

He wanted some one to speak to him like that. The Small Girl sat high on her father's shoulder, and her father held her mother's hand. It was like a chain of gold, their holding hands like that and loving each other——

The boy reached out and touched the woman's hand. She looked down at him and drew him close. He felt warmed and comforted. The red candle burning there in the darkness was like some sacred fire of friendship. He wished that it would never go out, that he might stand there watching it, with his small cold hand in the clasp of the Small Girl's mother.

It was late when the Boy-Next-Door got back to his own big house. But he had not been missed. Everybody was up, and everybody was angry. The Daughter-in-Law had declared the night before that she would not stay another day beneath that roof, and off she had gone with her young husband, and her little girl, who was to have had the pink doll on the tree.

"And good riddance," said the Next-Door-Neighbor.

But she ate no breakfast, and she went out to the kitchen and worked with her maids to get the dinner ready, and there were covers laid for nine instead of twelve.

And the Next-Door-Neighbor kept saying, "Good riddance—good riddance," and not once did she say, "A Merry Christmas."

But the Boy-Next-Door held something in his heart that was warm and glowing like the candle in the forest, and so he came to his mother and said,

"May I have the pink doll?"

She spoke frowningly. "What does a boy want of a doll?"

"I'd like to give it to the little girl next door."

"Do you think I buy dolls to give away in charity?"

"Well, they gave me a Christmas present."

"What did they give you?"

He opened his hand and showed a little flute tied with gay red ribbon. He lifted it to his lips and blew on it, a thin piping tune——

"Oh, that," said his mother scornfully. "Why, that's nothing but a reed from the pond!"

But the boy knew it was more than that. It was a magic pipe that made you dance, and made your heart warm and happy.

So he said again, "I'd like to give her the doll," and he reached out his little hand and touched his mother's—and his eyes were wistful.

His mother's own eyes softened—she had lost one son that day—and she said, "Oh, well, do as you please," and went back to the kitchen.

The Boy-Next-Door ran into the great room and took the doll from the tree, and wrapped her in paper, and flew out of the door and down the brick walk and straight into the little house.

When the door was opened, he saw that his friends were just sitting down to dinner—and there was the beefsteak pie all brown and piping hot, with a wreath of holly, and the Small Girl was saying,

"And the onions were silver, and the carrots were gold——"

The Boy-Next-Door went up to the Small Girl and said,

"I've brought you a present."

With his eyes all lighted up, he took off the paper in which it was wrapped, and there was the doll, in rosy frills, with eyes that opened and shut, and shoes and stockings, and curly hair that was bobbed and beautiful.

And the Small Girl, in a whirlwind of happiness, said, "Is it really my doll?"

And the Boy-Next-Door felt very shy and happy, and he said, "Yes."

And the Small Girl's mother said, "It was a beautiful thing to do," and she bent and kissed him.

Again that bursting feeling came into the boy's heart and he lifted his face to hers and said, "May I come sometimes and be your boy?"

And she said, "Yes."

And when at last he went away, she stood in the door and watched him, such a little lad, who knew so little of loving. And because she knew so much of love, her eyes filled to overflowing.

But presently she wiped the tears away and went back to the table. And she smiled at the Small Girl and at the Small Girl's father.

"And the potatoes were ivory," she said. "Oh, who would ask for turkey, when they can have a pie like this?"

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