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The Christmas Masquerade

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It was Christmas eve. Three months ago the mayor had ordered to have pamphlets hung throughout the city with a call to all children from the city to come to his Christmas masquerade. The mayor had promised to reimburse the costs for all the poor children whose parents weren't able to pay for the party.

The pamphlets were up for just a week when a new store opened in town. It was soon clear that this was a professional shopkeeper. His costumes were divine. The man himself was small with cheeks as red as roses. He wore a white wig with long curls and a suit made out of red velvet. He sat on a big stool behind his counter and helped his customers himself. He didn't have any help.

It didn't take long before the children discovered all the beautiful things he had and how well made his costumes were in comparison to other stores. Customers were coming in and out of his shop, from the mayor's daughter to the children from the orphanage. What stood out was that many rich children chose costumes that were in regards to a simple life, like a costume of a goose herder or a farmer. The poor kids took their opportunity to be a princess or a fairy for a couple of hours.

On Christmas eve the house of the mayor was filled with dressed up children. It was remarkable how real it all looked. The little fairies with silk skirts and fine wings really did look like magical creatures. And you couldn't picture anymore that in reality it was the daughter of a maid or the son of a laundress.

The mayor's daughter had picked the costume of a goose herder. She was hard to recognize! Usually she was a slim, gracious young lady who was tall for her age. Now she looked a bit ragged, like she was used to herding geese in any weather. And it was like that with all children. The Red Riding Hoods were looking around with big, fearful eyes wary of the big, bad wolf. The princesses held their heads high and made others effortlessly believe they were really princesses. The kids were having fun like never before. The mayor contently watched from the dining table. Next to him was his beautiful, eldest daughter Violetta. She wore a white dress and a hat made out of blue violets.



After the evening meal everybody went home satisfied. But shortly after something strange happened. When the proud parents tried to unbutton their kids' clothes, they couldn't do it. The buttons quickly buttoned themselves up again. This made the parents worry, but the kids were so tired that they climbed into bed in their costumes. The parents thought that maybe they would have more luck in the morning.

But the next morning around twelve in the afternoon a big wave of panic came over the city. Nobody was able to take the costumes off. And that wasn't even the worst thing: each of the children seemed to have taken over the personality of their costumes. The mayor's daughter insisted on herding her geese in the meadow. The princess demanded to be brought back to their castles. Red Riding Hood was crying, because she wanted to bring her basket with cookies to her grandma. The parents were in an uproar. They gathered at the new shopkeeper's store, because everybody thought that he was responsible for what was happening. The shop was closed and the shopkeeper had disappeared with all his belongings.

The mayor quickly gathered his council for an emergency meeting. They proposed to be advised by the Wise Woman. That was what the old woman was called who lived alone with her black cat in a small cabin at the edge of the city. She was very old and had raised a large amount of children. That's why she was looked at as very wise. So the council men went to visit her. But the woman had turned deaf and she didn't understand or hear what the council man wanted from her. The only one who had a loud voice was the soprano singer from the church choir. The men called for the singer and brought her to the wise woman. The singer sang the whole story close to her ear and she understood every word.

'Go home and give the kids a spoon of castor oil,' was the advice of the wise woman. The council men went through the city to give every child a spoon of castor oil. But it didn't help. The children were protesting loudly when they were forced to drink the nasty oil. And directly after the chimney sweepers cried for their brooms, the goose herder for her geese and the princesses for their castles.

The mayor and the council were very indignant and went with the singer to the house of the wise woman. 'You are a fraud!' said one of them, 'and that's why we strongly urge you to leave your house and the city.' The black cat started hissing. The old woman cast a spell and instead of one cat, one hundred twenty five cats were stranding and hissing. The mayor and the council quickly left. They couldn't fight that many cats.

Winter came around and the situation in the city worsened. Doctors were consulted and even the police were called. But nobody was able to help the children. Violetta, the eldest daughter of the mayor suddenly thought about the cherry man. He lived far from the city, but she knew he was very smart. He took care of the cherry trees and brought the cherries to the city to sell. She not only thought he was smart, but also gorgeous and charming. Maybe he would be able to help? One day she went to visit him and told him the whole story.

'What does the shopkeeper look like?' he asked. He thought Violetta was the most beautiful girl in the world. Violetta described the shopkeeper. 'I know where he is!' Said the cherry man. 'He lives in one of my cherry trees and doesn't want to come down.' Violetta ran to her father. The mayor called the council together and they left together to the cherry tree. When they arrived, they saw the shopkeeper sitting on one of the highest branches in the tree. Whatever they tried they couldn't get the man down. They even tried to chop down the tree, but they couldn't.

The shopkeeper was sitting in the tree eating cherries. Until he stood up and started to speak: 'I shall release your city and the costumes can be removed. But on two conditions.' The mayor said: 'Fine, let's hear it.' The shopkeeper continued: 'This party you threw for rich and poor was a good idea. But I think it will only happen once or twice more. Your successors shall probably not continue the tradition. That's why I want a law in place that makes sure that all poor children get a stocking on Christmas filled with beautiful gifts.'

The mayor promised to put the law in place. 'And what is your second condition?' he asked. 'The second condition,' said the shopkeeper, 'is that this good cherry man shall marry your eldest daughter Violetta. He has been kind to me. He let me live in his cherry tree and let me eat the cherries. I want to reward him for this.' At first the mayor didn't agree, but his desire to bring his youngest daughter back to her old self was bigger. At home all the children were released from their costumes. The law was passed and was lived up to every Christmas.

Violetta and the cherry man wanted to marry each other. All the children came to the wedding and threw flowers. The shopkeeper had disappeared mysteriously from the cherry tree the night before. But at the bottom of the tree he had left beautiful wedding gifts: silver cutlery and porcelain tableware with hand painted cherries.

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