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READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Mistress Merciless

Eugene Field

This is to tell of our little Mistress Merciless, who for a season lived among us, but is now and forever gone from us to the far-off land of Ever-Plaisance. The tale is soon told; for it would not be seemly to speak all the things that are in one's heart when one has to say of a much-beloved child whose life here has been shortened so that, in God's wisdom and kindness, her life shall be longer in that garden that blooms far away.

You shall know that all of us called her Mistress Merciless — but her mercilessness was of a sweet, persuasive kind: with the beauty of her face and the music of her voice and the exceeding sweetness of her virtues, she was apt to slay all hearts, and this she did without knowing it, for she was a little child. And so it was in love that we called her Mistress Merciless, just as it was in love that she lorded it over all our hearts.

One day she walked in a beautiful garden, and there went with her a handmaiden whom we called, in merriment, the Queen of Sheba — for this handmaiden was in truth no queen at all, but a plain and homely woman; yet she was wholly devoted to our little Mistress Merciless and served her faithfully, and for that good reason was beloved by us all. Yet in jest we called her the Queen of Sheba; and I venture to say she looked perfectly fair in the eyes of our little Mistress Merciless, for the eyes of children look not upon faces but into the hearts and souls of others.

While these two walked in the beautiful garden, they came before long to an arbor where there was a rustic seat called the Siege of Restfulness, and here sat a little sick boy who, from birth, had been lame, so that he could not play and make merry with other children, but would come every day into this beautiful garden and find contentment in the company of the flowers. And though he was a lame little boy, he never trod upon those flowers; and even had he done so, the touch of those halting feet would have been a kind of caress, for the little boy was filled with the spirit of love and tenderness. As the tiniest, whitest, most delicate flower breathes the most precious perfume, so from this little boy's life there came a grace that was hallowing in its beauty.

Since they had never seen him before, they asked his name; and he answered that at home they called him Master Sweetheart, a name he could not understand — for surely, being lame, he must be a very sorry sweetheart. Yet

that he was a sweetheart to his mother at least he had no doubt, for she loved to hold him in her lap and call him by that name; and many times when she did so he saw that tears were in her eyes — proof, she told him when he asked, that Master Sweetheart was her sweetheart above all others on earth.

It came to pass that our little Mistress Merciless and Master Sweetheart became fast friends, and the Queen of Sheba was handmaiden to them both; for that simple, loyal creature had no mind above the artless chatter of childhood, and the boy's strange, allegorical way of speaking filled her with wonder, even as the innocent lisping of our little Mistress Merciless delighted her heart. So each fair day these three came into the beautiful garden and wandered there together; and when they were tired they entered the arbor and sat together on the Siege of Restfulness. You may be sure there was not a flower or a tree or a shrub or a bird in all that beautiful garden that they did not know and love, and truly every flower and tree and shrub and bird therein knew and loved them.

When they sat together on the Siege of Restfulness, it was Master Sweetheart's habit to tell them of the land of Ever-Plaisance — for it was his belief that he journeyed each day nearer and nearer to that land, and that his journey there was nearly done. How he came to know of that land I cannot say; but I am glad to believe that, as he said, the exceeding fair angels told him of it when by night, as he lay sleeping, they came singing with their caresses to his bedside.

I speak now of a holy thing, and so I speak truly: while little children lie sleeping in their beds at night, it pleases God to send His angels with singing and caresses to bear messages of His love to those little sleeping children. And I have seen those angels bend with folded wings over the little cradles and the little beds, and kiss those sleeping children and whisper God's messages of love to them, and I knew that those messages were full of sweet tidings; for, even as they slept, the little children smiled. This I have seen, and there is no one who loves little children who will deny the truth of this thing I have now solemnly declared.

Of that land of Ever-Plaisance our little Mistress Merciless was always eager to hear. But when she pressed the rest of us to speak of it, we did not know what to say beyond confirming what Master Sweetheart had already told. For when it comes to knowing of that far-off land — ah me, who knows more than the smallest child? And sometimes within the heart of a little, helpless, fading one there blooms a wisdom that sages cannot comprehend. So when she asked us, we would send her to Master Sweetheart, for he knew the truth and spoke it.

It is now time to tell of an adventure that befell one day in that beautiful garden. In this garden lived many birds of surpassing beauty and most glorious song, and among them was one they called Joyous, for he would always carol forth so joyously, whatever the day might be. This bird Joyous had his home in the top of

a very tall tree close by the pleasant arbor, and here he would sit when the little people came, singing to them such songs as befitted that quiet spot and those who came there. But there was a wicked cat that lived nearby, and this cruel beast found no pleasure in the music that Joyous made — no, that music filled her with a murderous thirst for the blood of that singing innocent, and she had no peace for the malice within her as she schemed to seize the bird.

Now you must know that it was the custom of our little Mistress Merciless and Master Sweetheart to feed the birds in that fair garden with such crumbs as they were allowed to bring to the arbor, and at such times those birds would fly down with grateful twitterings and eat the crumbs from the grass all around the arbor. You may be sure it was a merry sight to see those twittering birds feasting on the good things the children brought, and our little Mistress Merciless and little Master Sweetheart had great joy in it. But one day, while those birds were making their merry feast, the wicked cat stole softly from a thicket and with one hideous bound made her way into the very midst of those birds and seized upon Joyous himself. Oh, there was a mighty din and a fearful fluttering, and the rest flew swiftly away, but Joyous could not, for the wicked cat held him in her cruel claws. And surely Joyous would have met his death, had not our little Mistress Merciless rushed forward with a cry of fury. She set about that wicked cat with Master Sweetheart's crutch until the cruel beast let go the fluttering bird and was very glad to escape with her aching bones into the thicket again. So it was that Joyous was saved from death — but even then it might have gone ill with him, had they not taken him up and dressed his wounds and cared for him until he was fully well again. And then they released him to go where he pleased, and he returned to his home in the tall tree close by the arbor, and there he sang to those children more sweetly than ever before, for his heart was full of gratitude to our little Mistress Merciless and Master Sweetheart.



Now, of all the dolls she had in goodly number, the one named Beautiful was the

one our little Mistress Merciless loved best. Know well that the doll Beautiful had not come from overseas and was neither wax nor china — she had been cleverly fashioned from a wooden bed-key, to the top of which the Queen of Sheba had added a head with a fair face, and upon the body and arms of the key she had hung the most wonderful raiment. To this doll Beautiful was our little Mistress Merciless deeply devoted; she would have the doll Beautiful lie by her side at night while she slept, and wherever she went during the day, there she would take the doll Beautiful too. Much grief and lamentation, therefore, did our little Mistress Merciless make when one unlucky day the doll Beautiful fell by chance into the fish-pond, and was not rescued until one of her fine eyes had been ruined by the water — so that ever after the doll Beautiful had but one eye, and that one grievously faded. And on another unlucky day there came a boisterous, rascal puppy who seized upon the doll Beautiful while she rested in the arbor, and bore her away, and romped roughly with her on the grass, and tore off her black-thread hair, and would surely have destroyed her entirely, had not the Queen of Sheba hurried to rescue the doll Beautiful and give that rascal puppy his due.

And so, as you can imagine, the days were busily and happily spent. The beautiful garden, with its flowers and singing birds and gracious arbor and Siege of Restfulness, was dear to those children, and amid these joyous scenes Master Sweetheart would tell each day of that far-off land of Ever-Plaisance, whither he said he was going. And one day, when the sun shone very bright and the beautiful garden rejoiced in the music of those birds, Master Sweetheart did not come, and they missed the little lame boy and wondered where he was. And as he never came again, they thought at last that surely he had departed to that country he loved to tell of — which filled our little Mistress Merciless with wonder and inquiry; and I think she was lonely ever after that, lonely for Master Sweetheart.

I am thinking now of her and of him; for this is the Christmas season — the time when it is most fitting to think of children and other sweet and holy things. There is snow everywhere, snow and cold. The garden is desolate and voiceless: the flowers are gone, the trees are bare, the birds have flown. It is winter out there, and it is winter, too, in this heart of mine. Yet in this Christmas season I think of them, and it pleases me — God forbid that I offend with much speaking — it pleases me to tell of the little things they did and loved. And you shall understand it all if, perhaps, this sacred Christmas time a little Mistress Merciless of your own, or a little Master Sweetheart, clings to your knee and sanctifies your hearthstone.

When evening came and all the joy of day was done, our little Mistress Merciless would grow weary; her eyelids would grow heavy and her little tired hands would

fold. At such times it was my custom to beguile her weariness with little fairy tales or with the gentle play that sleepy children love. Much was her fancy taken by what I told her of the train that every night sweeps away to Shut-Eye Town, bearing to that beautiful country all the sleepy little girls and boys. Nor would she be content until I told her this tale — yes, every night as I dressed her in her cap and gown, she would demand the story of Shut-Eye Town and the wonderful train that was to carry her there. And I would say it in this way:

At Bedtime-ville there is a train of cars waiting for you, my sweet — for you and for all the other little ones who would go to quiet, slumberous Shut-Eye Town.

But do not hurry; there is room for all. Each child has a tiny car that is snug and warm, and when the train starts, each car sways soothingly this way and that way, this way and that way, through all the journey of the night.

Your little gown is white and soft; your little cap will hold those pretty curls so fast they cannot get away. Here is a curl that peeps out to see what is going to happen. Hush, little curl! Make no noise; we will let you peep out at the wonderful sights, but you must not tell the others — let them sleep, snuggled close together.

The locomotive is ready to start. Can you not hear it?

"Shug-chug! Shug-chug! Shug-chug!" That is what the locomotive is saying, all to itself. It knows how pleasant a journey it is about to make.

"Shug-chug! Shug-chug! Shug-chug!"

Oh, many a time has it proudly swept over prairie and hill, over river and plain, through sleeping gardens and drowsy cities, swiftly and quietly, carrying the little ones to the far, pleasant valley where Shut-Eye Town lies.

"Shug-chug! Shug-chug! Shug-chug!"

So says the locomotive to itself at the station in Bedtime-ville, for it knows how fair and far a journey lies ahead.

Then a bell sounds. Surely my little one hears the bell!

"Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long!"

So sounds the bell, and it seems to invite you to sleep and dreams.

"Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long!"

How sweetly it rings and calls.

"To sleep — to dreams, O little lambs!" it seems to call. "Nestle down close, fold your hands, and shut your dear eyes! We are off and away to Shut-Eye Town! Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long! To sleep — to dreams, O little cosset lambs!"

And now the conductor calls out: "All aboard!" he calls. "All aboard for Shut-Eye Town!" he calls in a kindly tone.

But hark, dear-my-soul — do not hurry; there is room for all. Here is a cozy little car for you. How like your cradle it is — snug and warm, and it rocks this way and that way, this way and that way, all night long, and its pillows caress you tenderly. So step into the pretty nest, and in it speed away to Shut-Eye Town.

"Toot! Toot!"

That is the whistle. It sounds twice, but it must sound once more before the train can start. Now you have nestled down, and your dear hands are folded — let your two eyes be folded too, my sweet; for in a moment you shall be rocked away, and away, away into the golden mists of Balow!

"Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long!"

"All aboard!"

"Toot! Toot! Toot!"

And so my little golden apple is off and away for Shut-Eye Town!

Slowly the train moves, yet faster by degrees. Your hands are folded, my beloved, and your dear eyes are closed; and yet you see the beautiful sights that line the journey through the mists of Balow. And it is rockaway, rockaway, rockaway that your speeding cradle goes — rockaway, rockaway, rockaway, through the golden glories that lie along the path to Shut-Eye Town.

"Toot! Toot!"

So cries the whistle, and it is "down brakes," for here we are at Ginkville, that pleasant waking-place where mother with her gentle hands holds the gracious cup to her sleepy darling's lips.

"Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long!" and off is the train again. Swifter and swifter it speeds — oh, I am sure no other train speeds half so swiftly! The sights my dear one sees! I cannot describe them — one must see those beautiful sights to know how wonderful they are!

"Shug-chug! Shug-chug! Shug-chug!"

On and on and on the locomotive proudly carries the train.

"Ting-long! Ting-a-long! Ting-long!"

The bell calls again, but fainter and ever fainter; and fainter and fainter grows that other cry — "Toot! Toot! Toot!" — until at last I know that in far Shut-Eye Town my dear one is dreaming the dreams of Balow.

This was the bedtime tale I used to tell our little Mistress Merciless, and at its end I would look upon her face to see it calm and beautiful in sleep.

Then I would kneel beside her little bed and fold my two hands — thus — and let my heart call to the invisible host: "O guardian angels of this little child, hold her in your keeping from all the perils of darkness and the night! O sovereign Shepherd, cherish Your little lamb and mine, and, Holy Mother, fold her to your bosom and your love! But give her back to me — when morning comes, restore to me my little one!"

But once she did not come back. She had spoken much of Master Sweetheart and of that land of Ever-Plaisance where he had gone. And she was not afraid to make the journey alone; so when at last our little Mistress Merciless said goodbye to us and went away forever, we knew that it was better so — for she was lonely here, and without her that far country she journeyed toward would not have been content. Though our hearts were near to breaking with love of her, we knew that it was better so.

The tale is told, for it would not be seemly to speak all the things that are in one's heart when one has to say of a much-beloved child whose life here has been shortened so that, in God's wisdom and kindness, her life shall be longer in that garden that blooms far away.

About me are scattered the toys she loved, and the doll Beautiful has come down to me all battered and worn — yet oh, so very precious — from those distant years; yonder goes the Queen of Sheba in her service as handmaiden to me and mine — gaunt and sorrowful-eyed, yet faithful and sturdy as of old. The garden lies under the Christmas snow — the garden where ghost-like trees wave their arms and moan over the graves of flowers; the once gracious arbor is weathered now with the infirmities of age, the Siege of Restfulness fast sinking into decay, and long, oh long ago did that bird Joyous carol forth his last sweet song in the garden that was once so beautiful.

And amid it all — this heartache and the loneliness the years have brought — comes my Christmas gift today: the solace of a vision of that country where she — our little Mistress Merciless — has gone; a glimpse of that far-off land of Ever-Plaisance.

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