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The bad little goblin's New Year

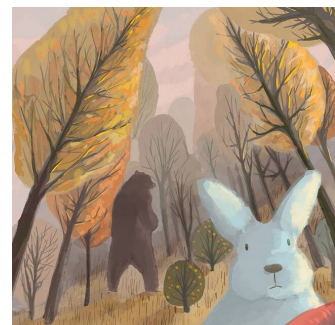
Mary Stewart

Come, let's sit on the floor around the fire and watch those golden flames dance and leap. You see that very happy one just springing up the chimney? I know a story about him, a New Year's story. Let's snuggle up closer and look into the fire. You see that piece of coal black wood, there at the end? There was a nasty little goblin once who looked just like a piece of coal. His clothes were all black, his round cap looked like a bit of coal, his pointed shoes were jet black, and his face was dark with dirt and an ugly scowling expression. Altogether he was a horrid looking goblin, and he was just as hateful as he looked. There wasn't a single person who liked him. The birds hated him because he would wait after dark when all the baby birds were cuddled down in the nest, fast asleep. Then he would pop up from under the nest where he had been hiding and cry, "Morning time, wake up!" and all the babies would cry, "Chirp, chirp, Daddy bring us our breakfast!" It took a long time to put the excited babies to sleep again. Once Midnight, that was the goblin's name, dropped a bit of twig down into a baby's open beak and the poor bird coughed so hard that he kept the birds in the nests around awake all night. Midnight chuckled with glee and went scurrying off on another prank.

While the mother bunnies were asleep he painted the tiny white flags they wear under their tails with brown mud. When the morning came and the mother bunnies woke up and called to their children to follow them, the little bunnies couldn't see any white flags on their mothers' tails to follow, and all got lost in the long grass. It took the whole day to gather them together, and longer to get those flags clean again.

Midnight jumped for joy. The mother bunnies would have liked to catch him with their sharp claws, but he was too quick for them.

Then Midnight found the holes where the squirrels had hidden their nuts for the winter. It had taken months to gather them, but Midnight waited until they were out hunting again, and he carried all the nuts away and hid them in the roots of an old tree where they would never think of looking!



These pranks made the timid wood creatures very upset. The birds, the rabbits,

and the squirrels rushed after the goblin. The birds pecked him with their beaks, and the squirrels and rabbits hopped after him with their claws outstretched. Midnight ran away, really frightened at last, faster and faster until he reached the darkest part of the whole forest. There he jumped into a hole in a tree, curling himself up so tightly that his round cap touched his pointed shoes, and while he trembled with fear he heard the birds and bunnies and squirrels go tearing past, thinking that the wicked little goblin was still running ahead of them.

When they were all gone, Midnight peeked out of his hole. Oh, how terribly quiet it was! Not a bird chirped, not a squirrel or a rabbit or a woodchuck lived there. It was so quiet and so dark and so lonely that Midnight began to feel quite sad. The bad little goblin put his head down upon his black knees and went to sleep; there was nothing else to do!

The first sound that woke him up was, "Chop-chop!" He rubbed his eyes and peeked out. He saw woodcutters cutting down trees with their sharp axes. Then he saw them coming toward the tree where he was hiding. Shaking with terror, Midnight curled himself up into a tight ball. Chop-chop-crash! went the tree, and Midnight's head bumped hard against the top of his hole as, still inside it, he felt the tree fall to the ground. That was rather fun, and much excited he peeked out of a crack and watched the men fastening chains around the trees and loading them on wheels. His own tree went, too, and the next thing Midnight heard was saw-saw, as the tree was sawed into logs at a lumber yard. He was still safe in his hole when his log was thrown with others, right down into a dark cellar. It was even drearier there than in the forest and Midnight began to long for some friends. "I wouldn't tease them. I'd just play with them nicely," he sighed, and two tears ran down his little dirty face, washing it almost clean.

Then Midnight heard a strange new sound. It was happier than a squirrel's chatter, sweeter than a bird's song,—it was a child's laughter! Where did it come from? Midnight stopped crying and listened. It came again and the laughter of other children mingled with it. Midnight peeked out. There was no one in the cellar. He crept out and tiptoed up the stairs, in search of those laughing voices. Hiding in the shadows so that no one could see him, he passed through the kitchen and on into a room full of sunshine and children. He ran in and hid behind a curtain, peeking out curiously. In the center of the room stood a little golden-haired girl, the one whose laughter he had first heard. But as Midnight watched her with delight he saw her pucker up her face as if she was about going to cry. "My dolly, my dear dolly, I can't find her!" she wailed. In a flash all the other boys and girls were searching under chairs and tables for the runaway dolly. They couldn't find her, but Midnight saw a pair of doll's feet poking out from under the sofa. He hopped swiftly across the floor, pulled the doll out by one leg and placed her on a chair beside the little girl.

"Oh, my doll's back!" she cried, hugging her with joy. "She went for a walk and came back again!" and taking the doll's two hands in hers she danced with her around the room. The other children danced, too, and their laughter rang out again. "She went for a walk and came back!" they cried.

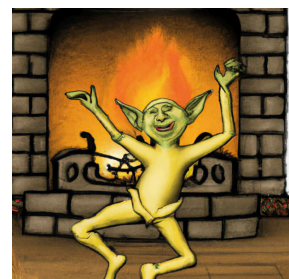
Midnight had never seen or heard anything so merry, it made him want to dance, also. But if somebody saw him, they would have kicked him out.

But Midnight took care that no one saw him. Except, perhaps, the children. He spent most of the time with them, and somehow they seemed to know that he was there and that he was their friend. Every evening when they had dinner they put a bowl of milk in front of the fire for him, and when they came for breakfast the bowl was always empty. I don't know how Midnight drank it without being seen, for he still slept in his log in the cellar and was asleep as soon as the children's heads touched their pillows. The children's mother was puzzled over that empty bowl, but she might have guessed there was a friendly goblin in the house by the way lost things were always turning up.

"I can't find my watch!" the mother would cry. "Come, children, and look for it!" On the floor, under the rug, in the flower pots, and on the tables the children looked. But hiding behind the curtain Midnight had seen a bit of something gold shining through the tassels of the sofa. Quick as a flash, he pulled it out and placed it on the arm of the mother's chair. "Why, here it is!" she exclaimed. "How did it get there?" The children laughed and winked at each other, as though they understood, but how could they explain about the goblin to mother?

One morning, it was New Year's Day, Midnight slept longer than usual. He was curled up inside his log, so sound asleep that even the joggling of his home being carried upstairs didn't waken him. Then he was turned upside down, and, opening his eyes, he peeked out of the crack and found that the log was about to be thrown onto the blazing fire! Crash! How hot it was, and then Midnight heard the children laughing. He poked his head out and saw them all sitting in front of the fire, watching the blaze. All around Midnight red and yellow flames were dancing, so golden, so happy that Midnight forgot to be frightened. "I want to be happy, too!" he cried. "I want to laugh with the children and dance with the flames." His log caught fire, blazed up and out sprang Midnight,—a little dirty goblin no longer!

Instead, he was the shiniest, most dancing golden flame that you ever saw! For a few moments he just danced up and down with delight, then, waving and bowing to the children, he cried, "Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" and sprang up the chimney.



When he reached the top he saw a glorious sight. The sun shining on the snow and ice turned the world into a sparkling Fairy-land, and the sky was as blue as forget-me-nots. Midnight danced with the sunbeams over the glittering ice until he almost ran into a flock of little birds huddled down in the snow, too cold to fly. Their feathers were ruffled and they looked very miserable. "Come play with me!" he cried, dancing around them. He was so happy and beautiful that they forgot the cold, and flew in circles around him. "Come and join us!" he cried to a group of rabbits who were hunched up upon the snow, half-frozen. They hopped along slowly toward him and then—they, too, forgot the cold while they played games with the golden goblin and the birds, until they were all as merry as the sunbeams. "Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" they called to each other, and to the twinkling flame goblin.

Then Midnight saw some squirrels curled up on the branches of a tree. "What is the matter; do you want some nuts?" he cried. "Follow me!" And away he darted to the roots of the tree where, as a naughty little goblin, he had hidden their winter store. The squirrels followed slowly, but when they saw their treasure their eyes sparkled, their teeth chattered with delight, and they scampered back and forth from the tree root to their own holes, their paws full of nuts. They were as happy as Midnight himself. "Happy New Year! Happy New Year!" they cried to their friend, whom they never dreamed was the bad little goblin they had chased away the autumn before!

So all day and for many days the goblin danced and sang and helped people and birds and the wood creatures. He twinkled as merrily in the sunshine out of doors as he did when he danced in the fire, warming the children and singing them songs.

"It's like Happy New Year every day when the goblin is here!" cried the children, dancing as happily on the rug in front of the fireplace as the sprite was dancing within the fire. "There he is now, do you see him? He is dancing and crackling and shouting to all of us, 'Happy New Year, Happy New Year!'"

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