



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Strawberry Thief

Unknown writer

The midday sun was shining brightly as two children ran merrily down the steep grassy slope leading from the little village to the neighbouring forest. Their loose, scanty clothing left head, neck, and feet bare. But this did not trouble them, for the sun's rays kissed their little round limbs, and the children liked to feel their warm kisses.

They were brother and sister; each carried a small jar to fill with strawberries, which their mother would sell in the town. They were very poor, almost the poorest people in the village. Their mother, a widow, had to work hard to buy bread for herself and children.

When strawberries or nuts were in season, or even the early violets, the children went into the forest to seek them, and by the fruit or flowers they gathered helped to earn many coins. The happy children ran joyously along as though they were the rulers of the beautiful world that stretched so seductively before them. The forest berries were still scarce, and would fetch a high price in the town; this is why they started so early in the afternoon, whilst other people still rested in their cool rooms.

Deep in the forest was many a spot, well known to the children, where large masses of strawberry plants flourished and bloomed, covering the ground with a luxurious carpet. White star-like blossoms in profusion looked roguishly out from the ample foliage; the little green and bright-red berries were there in crowds, but the ripe, dark-red fruit was difficult to find.

Very slowly the work proceeded, and as the gathered treasures in their small jars grew higher and higher the sun sank lower and lower. Busy with their task, the children forgot laughter and chattering; they tasted none of the lovely berries, scarcely looked at the violets and anemones; the sun's rays peeping through the branches the cock-chafers and butterflies were alike unheeded.

"Lorchen," cried Fried, at last, throwing back his sunburnt, heated face; "look, Lorchen, my jar is full!"

Lorchen looked up, her face flushed; her little jar was half-full. Oh, how she envied her brother his full jar! Fried was a good boy—he loved his little sister dearly. He made her sit down on the soft grass, placed his jar beside her, and did not cease his work until Lorchen's jar was likewise filled. Their day's work was

now ended. But it was so beautiful in the forest. The birds sang so joyfully among the leaves, everything exhaled the fragrance of the dewy evening that crept slowly between the trembling branches.

At a little distance a small stretch of meadow shimmered through the trees. The bright sunshine still rested on the fresh, green grass, and thousands of daffodils, bluebells, pinks, and forget-me-nots unfolded there their varied beauties. It was a delightful play-place for the children. They ran there, placed their jars carefully behind a large tree-trunk, and soon forgot their hard afternoon's work in a merry game. Greyer grew the shadows, closer the dusk of evening veiled the lonely forest. Then the brother and sister thought of returning—the rest had strengthened their weary limbs, and their game in the flowery meadow had made them cheerful and merry.

Now the dew that wetted their bare feet, and hunger that began to make itself felt, urged them to return home. They ran to the tree behind which they had placed their jars, but the jars had vanished. At first the children thought they had mistaken the place; they searched farther, behind every trunk, behind every bush, but no trace of the jars could they find.

They had vanished, together with the precious fruit. What would their mother say when they returned home, their task unfulfilled? With the price of the berries she intended to buy meal to make bread. They had been almost without bread for several days, and now they had not even the jars in which to gather other berries.

Lorchen began to sob loudly; Fried's face grew crimson with rage, and his eyes sparkled, he did not weep. The darkness increased, the tree-trunks looked black and spectral, the wind rustled in the branches. Who could have stolen their berries? No one had come near the meadow. Squirrels and lizards could not carry away jars. The poor children stood helpless beside the old tree-trunk. They could not return to their mother empty-handed; they feared she would get angry at them for losing sight of their jars.

The little girl shivered in her thin dress, and wept with fear, hunger, and fatigue. Fried took his little sister's hand, and said: "Listen, Lorchen: you must run home, it is night now in the forest. Tell mother our jars have disappeared, eat your supper, and go to bed and to sleep. I will remain here and search behind every tree and everywhere, until I find the jars. I am neither hungry nor tired, and am not afraid to pass the night alone in the forest, in spite of all the stories our grand-mother used to tell of wicked spirits in the forest, hobgoblins who tease children, will-o'-the-wisps, and mountain-demons who store their treasures beneath the earth."

Lorchen shuddered and looked fearfully around. Wrapping her little arms in her

apron, she wept bitterly.

"Come home with me, Fried," she pleaded. "I am afraid to go through the gloomy forest alone!"

Fried took her hand and went with her until they saw the lights of the village. Then he stopped and said: "Now run along alone; see, there is the light burning in our mother's window. I shall turn back, I cannot go home empty-handed."

He turned quickly into the forest. Lorchén waited a moment, and cried, "Fried, Fried!" Then, receiving no answer, she fled swiftly up the grassy slope she had descended so merrily a few hours previously.

Their mother, who had grown uneasy at their long absence, was standing at the door when Lorchén returned, weeping and breathless. Poor child, she had hardly strength enough left to tell that they had lost strawberries and jars, and that Fried had remained behind.



The mother grew sad as she listened—she had hardly any bread left, and knew not when she could buy more; but Fried remaining in the forest was worse than all, for she, like all the villagers, firmly believed in hobgoblins. Sadly she lay down to rest beside her little daughter.

Fried ran ever farther and farther into the forest, through whose thick foliage the stars looked down timidly. He said his evening prayer, and no longer feared the rustling of the leaves, the cracking of the branches, or the whisper of the night wind in the trees.

Soon the moon arose, and it was light enough for Fried to seek his jars. In vain his search—the hours passed and he found nothing. At length he saw a small mountain overgrown with shrubs. Then the moon crept behind a thick cloud, and all was dark. Tired out, Fried sank down behind a tree and almost fell asleep. Suddenly he saw a bright light moving about close to the mountain, He sprang up and hastened towards it.

Coming closer, he heard a peculiar noise, as of groans uttered by a man engaged in heavy toil. He crept softly forward, and beheld, to his astonishment, a little dwarf, who was trying to push some heavy object into a hole, that apparently led into the mountain. The little man wore a silver coat and a red cap with points, to which the wonderful light, a large, sparkling precious stone, was fastened.

Fried soon stood close behind the dwarf, who in his eagerness had not observed the boy's approach, and saw with indignation that the object the little man was striving so hard to push into the hole was his jar of strawberries. In great wrath Fried seized a branch that lay near, and gave the little man a mighty blow. Thereupon the dwarf uttered a cry very like the squeak of a small mouse, and tried to creep into the hole.



But Fried held him fast by his silver coat, and angrily demanded where he had put his other jar of strawberries. The dwarf replied he had no other jar, and strove to free himself from the grasp of the little giant.

Fried again seized his branch, which so terrified the dwarf that he cried: "The other jar is inside; I will fetch it for you."

"I should wait a long time," said Fried, "if I once let you escape; no, I will go with you and fetch my own jar."

The dwarf stepped forward, the light in his cap shining brighter than the brightest candle. Fried followed, his jar in one hand, and the branch in the other. Thus they journeyed far into the mountain. The dwarf crept along like a lizard, but Fried, whose head almost touched the roof, could not easily get along.

At last strains of lovely music resounded through the passages: a little farther on their journey was stopped by a grey stone wall. Taking a silver hammer from his doublet, the little dwarf gave three sounding knocks on the wall; and as it opened such a flood of light streamed forth that Fried had to close his eyes. Half-blinded, with hand shading his face, he followed the dwarf, the stone door closed behind them, and Fried was in the secret dwellings of the gnomes.

A murmur of soft voices, mingled with the sweet strains of the music, sounded in his ears. When he was able to remove his hand from his eyes, he saw a wondrous sight. A beauteous, lofty hall, hewn out of the rock, lay before him; on the walls sparkled thousands of precious stones such as his guide had worn in his cap. They served instead of candles, and shed forth a radiance that almost blinded human eyes.

Between them hung wreaths and sprays of flowers such as Fried had never before seen. All around crowds of wonderful little dwarfs stood gazing at him full of curiosity.

In the centre of the hall stood a throne of green transparent stone, with cushions of soft mushrooms. On this sat the gnome-King; around him was thrown a golden mantle, and on his head was a crown cut from a flaming carbuncle. Before the

throne the dwarf, Fried's guide, stood relating his adventure.

When the dwarf ceased speaking, the King rose, approached the boy, who still stood by the door, surrounded by the gnomes, and said: "You human child, what has brought you to my secret dwelling?"

"My Lord Dwarf," replied Fried politely, "I desire my strawberries which that dwarf has stolen. I ask you to return them to me, and then let me go so I can go home to my mother."

The King thought for a few moments, then he said: "Listen, today we hold a great feast, for which your strawberries are necessary. I will, therefore, buy them. I will also allow you to remain with us a short time, then my servants shall lead you back to the entrance of the mountain."

"Do you have money to buy my strawberries?" asked the boy.

"Foolish child, don't you know that the gold, silver, and copper come out of the earth? Come with me and see my treasure-chambers."

So saying, the King led him from the hall through long rooms, in which mountains of gold, silver, and copper were piled; in other rooms lay like masses of precious stones. They came to a grotto, in the centre of which stood a large vase. From out this vase poured three sparkling streams, each of a different colour: they flowed out of the grotto and discharged themselves into the veins of the rocks.



Beside these streams knelt dwarfs, filling buckets with the flowing gold, silver, and copper, which other dwarfs carried away and stored in the King's treasure-chambers. But the greatest quantity flowed into the crevices of the mountain, from whence men dig it out with much toil.

Fried would have liked to fill his pockets with the precious metals, but did not dare ask the gnome-King's permission. They soon returned to the hall where the feast was prepared. On a long white marble table stood rows of golden dishes filled with various dainties, prepared from Fried's strawberries. In the background sat the musicians, bees and grasshoppers, that the dwarfs had caught in the forest. The dwarfs ate off little gold plates, and Fried ate with them. But the pieces were so tiny, they melted on his tongue before he could taste them.

After the feast came dancing. The gnome-men were old and shrivelled, with

faces like roots of trees; all wore silver coats and red caps. The gnome-maidens were tall and stately, and wore on their heads wreaths of flowers that sparkled as though wet with dew. Fried danced with them, but because his clothes were so poor, his partner took a wreath of flowers from the wall and placed it on his head. Very pretty it looked on his bright, brown hair—but he could not see this, for the dwarfs have no looking-glasses. The bees buzzed and hummed like flutes and trombones, the grasshoppers chirped like fiddles.

The dancing ended, Fried approached the King, who was resting on his green throne, and said: "My Lord King, be so good as to pay for my berries, and have me guided out of the mountain, for it is time I returned to my mother."

The King nodded his carbuncle crown, and wrapping his golden mantle around him, departed to fetch the money. How Fried rejoiced at the thought of taking that money home! Being very tired, he mounted the throne, seated himself on the soft mushroom cushion from which the gnome-King had just risen, and, ere that monarch returned, Fried was sleeping sound as a dormouse.



Day was dawning in the forest when he awoke. His limbs were stiff, and his bare feet icy cold. He rubbed his eyes and stretched himself. He still sat beneath the tree from where, on the previous evening, he had seen the light moving. "Where am I?" he muttered; then he remembered falling asleep on the gnome-King's mushroom cushion. He also remembered the money he had been promised, and felt in his pockets—they were empty. Yes, he remembered it all. This was the morning his mother should have gone to town, and he had neither berries nor money. Tears flowed from his eyes, and he reviled the dwarfs who had carried him sleeping from the mountain, and cheated him out of his money. Rising sorrowfully, he went to the mountain, but though he searched long and carefully, no opening could he find.

There was nothing for it but to return home, and this he did with a heavy heart. No one was stirring when he reached the village. Gently he knocked on the shutter of the room where his mother slept. "Wake up, mother," he cried.

Quickly the door of the little house opened.

"Thank Heaven you have returned," said his mother, embracing him. "But has nothing happened to you all night alone in the forest?"

"Nothing, mother," he replied; "I only had a foolish dream about the gnomes who dwell in the mountain."

And whilst his mother lit the stove, Fried related his dream. She shook her head on hearing it, for she believed her boy had really seen and heard these wonderful things.

Then Lorchén came in, and her mother told her to open the shutters. The child obeyed, but on re-entering the room, she cried aloud, and placed her hands on her brother's head.

Something heavy and sparkling fell to the ground. They picked it up. It was the wreath of many-coloured flowers Fried's partner had given him at the dance. But the flowers were not like those that grow in the fields and meadows: they were cold, and sparkling, like those that adorned the walls of the mountain hall, and which the gnome-maidens wore in their hair.

It was now clear that Fried had really spent the night with the dwarfs. They all thought the flowers were only coloured glass; but as they sparkled so brilliantly, and filled the cottage with indescribable splendour, the mother determined to ask advice about them. She therefore broke a tiny branch from the wreath and took it to the town to a goldsmith, who told her, to her great astonishment, that the branch was composed of the most costly gems, rubies, diamonds, and sapphires. In exchange for it, he gave her a sack of gold so heavy she could scarcely carry it home.

Want was now at an end for ever, for the wreath was a hundred times more valuable than the tiny branch. Great excitement prevailed in the village when the widow's good fortune was made known, and all the villagers ran into the forest to search for the wonderful hole. But their searching was vain—none ever found the entrance to the mountain. From henceforth the widow and her children lived very happily; they remained pious and industrious in spite of their wealth, did good to the poor, and were contented to the end of their lives.

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