



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

The Merry Little King

Mary Stewart

The young maple tree stood in the middle of the pasture, and it looked so cheerful. Rows and rows of dark cedars and hemlocks grew all around it. They towered over the little maple, yet they seemed to bow to it, shielding it from the wind that tossed their branches. The small tree was covered in leaves of flaming crimson and gold, and they danced and fluttered in the sunshine.

"Is it really only a maple tree?" thought Jamie, who lay in the grass of the old pasture, watching.

Ever since one frosty night had painted the leaves with splendour, that young tree had been a true friend to him. Jamie had hurt his back the year before. This summer, while the other boys climbed mountains and swam in streams, he could only make his way on crutches as far as the pasture. There he lay for hours, watching clouds drift across the sky and wishing he could be a cloud or a bird, so he could fly too. The days were long. To pass the time, Jamie made up stories about the faraway mountains, the stream rippling at the bottom of the field, and the dark evergreens around the flaming maple.

"They're dull old courtiers," he thought, "and he's a merry little king in his coronation robes." And then he sat up in astonishment and rubbed his eyes.

The maple was gone. In its place stood a little king! A crown of gleaming jewels sat on his head. He wore robes of flaming crimson, with a mantle of woven gold flung over them. The dark evergreens had vanished too. Around the king stood a crowd of grave, solemn courtiers in green velvet, all frowning at him. He stamped his foot (Jamie heard it), and then he cried in a clear, boyish voice:

"I won't be a king! I won't sit on a throne all day, making laws and punishing people and being bowed to. I want to be a little boy and have fun, I do!"

Just then a gust of wind lifted the mantle from his shoulders. It flew off like a handful of golden leaves. And the king himself (or was it only a branch of scarlet leaves?) came scampering across the grass toward Jamie.

"Come on!" he said gleefully. "We're running away, you and I. We're going to have the merriest day of our whole lives!"

"But my crutches," Jamie sighed. "See? I can't run."

"Can't you?" the little king whispered gently. "Close your eyes and hold my hand tight."

Jamie shut his eyes. Something soft, like a bit of thistledown, brushed his cheek. Then, light as that same thistledown, he felt himself rising from the ground, drifting, floating, flying, up and up. "Now open your eyes," said the little king's laughing voice.

Jamie looked around, puzzled. His clothes were crimson velvet, just like the king's. Was he a king too? Or were they only leaves, fluttering through the air?

"Never mind what you are," the king laughed, reading his face. "We can all be much more than we dream of, until the Spirit of Autumn takes hold of us. The folks below think we're just leaves, but we know better. Now, where shall we go? This is my last gorgeous day. Tonight Autumn flies away from the cold breath of Winter. Let's go wherever you most want to see."

"Flying is such fun I don't care where we go," said Jamie. Then both boys (for let's call them boys) stopped drifting and gazed at what lay ahead. They were in sunshine, but a shower was falling in the distance, and across the sky stretched a perfect rainbow.

"Did you ever hear about the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow?" Jamie asked excitedly. "Let's go and find it!"



"All right," said the king. "And if we don't find the gold, we may find something even more wonderful."

They flew toward the rainbow, whose colours were growing paler in the middle but more glorious at the end.

"Shut your eyes again and hold on tight," said the king. "I have to fill your eyes with mist, or the sight would blind you. No boy has ever seen it before, except in dreams."

For a moment Jamie shivered. They seemed to be passing through thick fog. Then: "Open your eyes!"

Picture a great golden hall filled with streams of colour, each one as bright as sunshine, yet seen through mist so softly that it couldn't dazzle you. Each ribbon of colour moved and wove in and out among the others like a dancer, so fast it was almost impossible to catch. And catching them was exactly what hundreds of little fairies were trying to do. They had butterfly wings and scarves of thistledown, and each carried a golden pot. When a fairy caught a colour, it

rushed away and left a small bit of itself in his hand. He dropped it into his pot with a merry, tinkling laugh and was off after the next dancing, gleaming scrap of rainbow.

"So *that's* where the pots of gold are!" cried Jamie. "But what do the fairies do with the colours?"

A very merry sprite came tearing past, his pot brimming with glowing crimson. "Mine's the favourite just now!" he cried. "I've got a billion trees to paint, and whatever's left over goes to the cardinal flowers."

"Mine's just as popular," sang another, whose pot overflowed with gold. "There are millions of goldenrods for me to colour, as well as the trees!"

"And Autumn loves mine, too," chanted a delicate little sprite with a pot of violet. "Think of all the asters! Without them your goldenrods would be very tiresome."

"And mine," rippled another, whose pot was blue as the sea. "Autumn always wants mine! Gentians are rare because one blossom takes more colour than a thousand of spring's forget-me-nots."

Just then a flaming orange stream rushed past, and Jamie and the little king both made a grab for it.

"Thieves! Robbers!" cried the colours, whirling in fury. In a moment they were dancing wildly before the frightened boys. There was a crash like thunder, and the two found themselves lying on the ground, wrapped in wet, thick, grey mist. The glorious dance was gone.

"I suppose we deserved that," sighed Jamie. "But I did want a pocketful of colour to show the other boys."

"Never mind. Let's fly out of this mist and have more fun!" cried the king.

Up they floated into the sunshine, and found the winds had been busy while they were away. Nearly every tree stood dark and bare, and the air was full of brilliant, whispering leaves.

"Winter's coming soon," said the king. "Look at the spot where I grew."

Far below, in the middle of the pasture, stood the maple, with just one crimson leaf still fluttering on its branch.

"When that leaf is gone, I'll have to say good night for many months," said the king. "Come on. Before that happens, we'll visit the Cavern of the Winds and hear how Autumn plays them."

This time they flew higher, and it grew so cold that Jamie pulled his scarlet robes tight around him. They passed through thin clouds, and then into one enormous

cloud shaped like a castle. Inside was a hall so vast that Jamie couldn't see the far end. But he could hear, far away beyond great arches, the rumble of a mighty organ. It crashed and thundered until the whole hall shook.

"That's Autumn, playing the organ of the winds," said the little king. He shouted it in Jamie's ear, but it sounded like a whisper beneath the music. "When she touches the keys, the winds fill the pipes and go roaring off to carry the leaves away. But listen. She knows almost all the leaves have fallen, and now she's singing them good night."

The crashing stopped. Through the great hall floated a lullaby, as sweet as a thrush's song at twilight, as tender as a wood-dove's call. Jamie closed his eyes and thought of lapping waves, of sunsets, of the new moon rising and the first stars blossoming in the sky.

Did he fall asleep there, in the Cavern of the Winds, while the Spirit of Autumn sang good night to her flaming world? He never knew. When he opened his eyes, he was standing on his own doorstep, pulling something soft and white around him against the cold. He heard a whisper, "Good night, Comrade, until next autumn," and a flutter like leaves flying away. Then the door opened, and in the light of the blazing fire he heard his mother's voice.

"Why, Jamie, you're covered in snow! And, my boy, where are your crutches?"

He ran into the house, straight into his mother's open arms. His crutches were still lying out in the pasture, buried under the snow.

Was it a gift from the Spirit of Autumn to one little boy? It was one more of her gifts, given along with her flaming leaves, her wind-music, and her glorious flowers. Hasn't she a gift for you, too, among them? Open your eyes and ears, and find what your heart wants most.

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