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The FAIRY CHRISTMAS TREE



AXmas Fairy Story for Children
by EDWARD WRIGHT

The wife and husband looked up in astonishment. The berries on the mountain ash were glowing with a deep, soft, red light. The tree seemed to be hung with lamps carved out of large round rubies. The inexpressibly beautiful radiance grew richer and fuller and brighter, flooding all the room, and transfiguring, with its strange rose-red tint, the wondering faces of man, woman and children.

It was an uncommonly late hour when Dan Derrick set out to get something for a Christmas dinner. The bell in the village church chimed twelve, and the sounds came floating on the cold, still air of the forest.

"This is a fine night for rabbiting, eh, Rough?" said Dan to his dog, as he came to a warren. "But hide a minute," he added.

His eye had been attracted by a little mountain ash growing above the warren. Being a young tree, it had not lost its red, autumnal leaves, and it was laden with berries.

"Now, that would make a pretty Christmas-tree for the little ones," he said. He pulled it up by its roots from the loose earth, and put it under a neighboring oak.

Taking a net out of his pocket, he fixed it round some of the rabbit-holes in the warren, and said to the dog:

"Now round 'em up, lad; round 'em up!"

Rough knew his work well. He raced like a black shadow across the mountain waste of snow, to the nearest field of winter cabbages, and there he silently routed out the rabbits, and sent them helter-skelter back to their holes.

"Dat the net!" said Dan, springing out from behind the oak.

"Somehow he had not fixed it firmly, and the rabbits knocked it over and escaped. Only one got entangled in the loose meshes.

"One wild rabbit isn't much of a Christmas feast for man and wife and five little ones," said Dan ruefully, as he threw it beside the mountain ash.

"Ah, hal! I've caught you red-handed this time, Dan!"

The poacher turned, and found a keeper watching him.

"I'm only after a rabbit," he exclaimed.

"Yes," said the keeper. "I've been tracking you in the hopes that you were after the deer again. But it doesn't matter. Soon as Christmas is over I'll have you up for it."

He walked away, leaving Dan Derrick in a state of hopeless misery. This capped it all. Dan was a wood-cutter. But the winter before his right arm had been crushed by a falling tree, and he had lost the use of it. With the help of Rough, however, he had managed, since that accident, just to keep his wife and children from starving.

Now all that was over. The magistrate would impose a fine on him, and, having no money to pay it, he would be sent to prison. What would become of his wife and the five little ones?

"Well," he said, with an attempt at cheerfulness, "I won't spoil your Christmas by telling them of what's waiting for me a couple o' days after."

He returned home by the way he came, and picked up the rabbit and the mountain ash, and went to bed without saying anything to his wife.

It was to the merrymaking by candlelight that they all looked forward. The morning they spent in gathering holly, and the afternoon in decking the cottage with it, and Dan himself forgot his troubles in a secret work of decoration. Shutting himself in the shed, he planted the mountain ash in a deep box filled with leaf mould, and clipped off a few unsightly leaves and tied bits of gayly colored paper on the branches. When the rabbit pie was at last placed on the table in the full light of the solitary candle, he told his two eldest boys to bring in something which they would find in the shed.

In the meantime his wife, Doll, served him with some of the pie. But with the first piece of rabbit that he ate, the thought of his misfortune overcame him, and he burst into tears, and told his wife what had happened. She took the news in a very strange way.

"That, that!" she cried wildly, pointing to the mountain ash, which the boys were bringing in. "You pulled that up? Oh, now I understand! Now I understand! 'Tisn't the first fairy tree you've hurt. What were you doing last winter when the elm fell on your arm? Oh, you mad, senseless man!"

She covered her face with her hands and wept, rocking herself to and fro in utter grief. Dan gazed at her blankly. Even now he didn't understand what she was raving about. Was the thought of his misfortune driving her out of her mind? It was bad enough, surely, but she needn't take it in that manner. He came and sat beside her, and bent tenderly over her, and tried to comfort her.

"Look at the Christmas-tree, mammy!" shouted the children, dancing with delight and clapping their hands. "Look at the Christmas-tree, daddy! Oh, isn't it lovely!"

of the cold and the snow. It will be much nicer for us to dance by a warm fire this weather than out in the chill forest."

"I'm sorry we've nothing of a supper for you, ma'am," said Doll Derrick. "But if you'd care to taste our rabbit pie?"

"No! no!" said the Queen of the Elves, touching the table with her wand. "You must permit me to provide a feast for you this Christmas."

The table at once became covered with a splendid dinner. There were roast turkeys, and Christmas pudding and grapes, and nuts and sweets, and boxes of crackers, and every good thing, in fact, that the heart of man could wish for.

"Now," said the Queen of the Elves, "while you are all enjoying yourselves we will do our Christmas homage to the Lady of the Mountain Ash. Strike up, my merry harpers!"

Four little men, with four little harps, sat down by the fire, and began to make a sweet, faery music, and the Queen and the other elves took hold of hands, and danced round the red-lighted mountain ash. And as they danced they sang:

If there was one thing that little Peggy Derrick liked even more than Christmas pudding it was dancing; and there was, besides, a strange and delicious charm in the music that the elfin harpers were

playing.

"Oh, let's go and dance, too!" she cried, "and finish the feast afterwards."

She got down from the table, and her four brothers followed. Then her mother came, and at last Dan himself, now

trembling with anxiety, joined them.

As they whirled round, the lights on the mountain ash grew dim, and about the tree a soft incense gathered, and took on the form of a lady of wild, un-speakable beauty, clad in vapory, trailing robes. When the dancers gave over, she was standing beside the tree in the center of the ring, and gazing at Dan Derrick. There was a kindness in her glance, but, for all that, poor Dan's knees shook under him.

"Well, all's well that ends well," she said. "But you were a very bold man, Dan, to bring me into your house in so unceremonious a fashion. I had half a mind to slay you outright last night!"

Dan then had a glorious inspiration. "It was well for you that you didn't hurt me, ma'am," he said very respectfully, yet firmly. "Look what I've done for you already. Some rabbit had burrowed under your tree, and the earth was so loose there that down you would surely have come in the next gale. You oughtn't to have set that keeper on me, you know."

"Yes, I'm sorry now for that," said the Lady of the Tree. "But hurry back at once to the spot from which you took me, and dig there and take what you find."

Away went Dan with a spade, and the Lady of the Tree and the Queen of the Elves began to talk together.

When Dan returned, carrying, with some difficulty, a heavy sack on his shoulder, he heard the Lady say to the Elf Queen:

"Yes, I think you are right. The motor-cars are a great nuisance. A quiet orchard on the skirts of the forest would be the very place for us."

"I know of a fine fruit-farm for sale, ma'am," said Dan. "And, from what I can see, there's plenty of money in this sack to buy it."

"Very well; buy it, my friend," said the Lady of the Tree, "and plant the mountain ash there; and the elves and I will look after the fruit for you."

Before departing back into the fairy tree, she stroked Dan's arm; and he was able to open the door with it as he said good-night to the Queen of the Elves and her troop.

Dan now grows the best apples in New England, and he has a very good crop of them in the worst season.

"I say, Mr. Derrick," said a stranger one day, "why don't you root up that useless mountain ash in the center there?"

"Oh, that's what some folks call a fairy tree!" said Dan. "They say it brings a man luck."

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