

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

The Joyous Story of Toto



Laura Richards

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CHAPTER I

TOTO was a little boy, and his grandmother was an old woman (I have noticed that grandmothers are very apt to be old women); and this story is about both of them. Now, whether the story be true or not you must decide for yourselves; and the child who finds this out will be wiser than I.

Toto's grandmother lived in a little cottage far from any town, and just by the edge of a thick 2 wood; and Toto lived with her, for his father and mother were dead, and the old woman was the only relation he had in the world.

The cottage was painted red, with white window-casings, and little diamond-shaped panes of glass in the windows. Up the four walls grew a red rose, a yellow rose, a woodbine, and a clematis; and they all met together at the top, and fought and scratched for the possession of the top of the chimney, from which there was the finest view; so foolish are these vegetables.

Inside the cottage there was a big kitchen, with a great open fireplace, in which a bright fire was always crackling; a floor scrubbed white and clean; a dresser with shining copper and tin dishes on it; a table, a rocking-chair for the grandmother, and a stool for Toto. There were two bedrooms and a storeroom, and perhaps another room; and there was a kitchen closet, where the cookies lived. So now you know all about the inside of the cottage. Outside there was a garden behind and a bit of green in front, 3 and three big trees; and that is all there is to tell.

As for Toto, he was a curly-haired fellow, with bright eyes and rosy cheeks, and a mouth that was always laughing.

His grandmother was the best grandmother in the world, I have been given to understand, though that is saying a great deal, to be sure. She was certainly a very good, kind old body; and she had pretty silver curls and pink cheeks, as every grandmother should have. There was only one trouble about her; but that was a very serious one, – she was blind.

Her blindness did not affect Toto much; for he had never known her when she was not blind, and he supposed it was a peculiarity of grandmothers in general. But to the poor old lady herself it was a great affliction, though she bore it, for the most part, very cheerfully. She was wonderfully clever and industrious; and her fingers seemed, in many ways, to see better than some people's eyes. She kept the cottage always 4 as neat as a new pin. She was an excellent cook, too, and made the best gingerbread and cookies in the world. And she knit – oh! how she *did* knit! – stockings, mittens, and comforters; comforters, mittens, and stockings: all for Toto. Toto wore them out very fast; but he could not keep up with his grandmother's knitting. Clickety click, clickety clack, went the shining needles all through the long afternoons, when Toto was away in the wood; and nothing answered the needles, except the tea-kettle, which always did its best to make things cheerful. But even in her knitting there were often trials for the grandmother. Sometimes her ball rolled off her lap and away over the floor; and then the poor old lady had a hard time of it groping about in all the corners (there never was a kitchen that had so many corners as hers), and knocking her head against the table and the dresser.

The kettle was always much troubled when anything of this sort happened. He puffed angrily, and looked at the tongs. "If *I* had legs," 5 he said, "I would make some use of them, even if they *were* awkward and ungainly. But when a person is absolutely *all* head and legs, it is easy to understand that he should have no heart."

The tongs never made any reply to these remarks, but stood stiff and straight, and pretended not to hear.

But the grandmother had other troubles beside dropping her ball. Toto was a very good boy, – better, in fact, than most boys, – and he loved his grandmother very much indeed; but he was forgetful, as every child is. Sometimes he forgot this, and sometimes that, and sometimes the other; for you see his heart was generally in the forest, and his head went to look after it; and that often made trouble. He always *meant* to get before he went to the forest everything that his grandmother could possibly want while he was away. Wood and water he never forgot, for he always brought those in before breakfast. But sometimes the brown potatoes sat waiting in the cellar closet, with their jackets all buttoned up, 6 wondering why they were not taken out, as their brothers had been the day before, and put in a wonderful wicker cage, and carried off to see the great world. And the yellow apples blushed with anger and a sense of neglect; while the red apples turned yellow with vexation. And sometimes, – well, sometimes *this* sort of thing would happen: one day the old lady was going to make some gingerbread; for there was not a bit in the house, and Toto could *not* live without gingerbread. So she said, “Toto, go to the cupboard and get me the ginger-box and the soda, that’s a good boy!”

Now, Toto was standing in the doorway when his grandmother spoke, and just at that moment he caught sight of a green lizard on a stone at a little distance. He wanted very much to catch that lizard; but he was an obedient boy, and always did what “Granny” asked him to do. So he ran to the cupboard, still keeping one eye on the lizard outside, seized a box full of something yellow and a bag full of something white, 7 and handed them to his grandmother. “There, Granny,” he cried, “that’s ginger, and *that’s* soda. Now may I go? There’s a lizard – ” and he was off like a flash.

Well, Granny made the gingerbread, and at tea-time in came Master Toto, quite out of breath, having chased the lizard about twenty-five miles (so he said, and he ought to know), and hungry as 8 a hunter. He sat down, and ate his bread-and-milk first, like a good boy; and then he pounced upon the gingerbread, and took a huge bite out of it. Oh, oh! what a dreadful face he made! He gave a wild howl, and jumping up from the table, danced up and down the room, crying, “Oh! what *nasty* stuff! Oh, Granny, how *could* you make such horrid gingerbread? Br-r-rr! oh, dear! I never, never, *never* tasted anything so horrid.”

The poor old lady was quite aghast. “My dear boy,” she said, “I made it just as usual. You must be mistaken. Let me – ” and then *she* tasted the gingerbread.

Well, she did not get up and dance, but she came very near it. “What does this mean?” she cried. “I made it just as usual. What can it be? Ah!” she added, a new thought striking her. “Toto, bring me the ginger and the soda; bring just what you brought me this afternoon. Quick! don’t stop to examine the boxes; bring the same ones.”

Toto, wondering, brought the box full of something yellow, and the bag full of something white.

His grandmother tasted the contents of both, and then she leaned back in her chair and laughed heartily. “My dear little boy,” she said, “you think I am a very good cook, and I myself think I am not a very bad one; but I certainly *cannot* make good gingerbread with mustard and salt instead of ginger and soda!”

Toto thought there *were* some disadvantages about being blind, after all; and after that his grandmother always tasted the ingredients before she began to cook.

Now, it happened one day that the grandmother was sitting in the sun before the cottage door, knitting; and as she knitted, from time to time she heaved a deep sigh. And one of those sighs is the reason why this story is written; for if the grandmother had not sighed, and Toto had not heard her, none of the funny things that I am going to tell you would have happened. Moral: always sigh when you want a story written.

Toto was just coming home from the wood, where he had been spending the afternoon, as usual. As he came round the corner of the cottage he heard his grandmother sigh deeply, as if she were very sad about something; and this troubled Toto, for he was an affectionate little boy, and loved his grandmother dearly.

“Why, Granny!” he cried, running up to her and throwing his arms round her neck. “Dear Granny, why do you sigh so? What is the matter? Are you ill?”

The grandmother shook her head, and wiped a tear from her sightless eyes. “No, dear little boy!” she said. “No, I am not ill; but I am very lonely. It’s a solitary life here, though you are too young to feel it, Toto, and I am very glad of that. But I do wish, sometimes, that I had some one to talk to, who could tell me what is going on in the world. It is a long time since any one has been here. The travelling pedler comes only once a year, and the last time he came he had a toothache, so that he could not talk. Ah, deary me! 11 it’s a solitary life.” And the grandmother shook her head again, and went on with her knitting.

Toto had listened to this with his eyes very wide open, and his mouth very tight shut; and when his grandmother had finished speaking, he went and sat down on a stone at a little distance, and began to think very hard. His grandmother was lonely. The thought had never occurred to him before. It had always seemed as natural for her to stay at home and knit and make cookies, as for him to go to the wood. He supposed all grandmothers did so. He wondered how it felt to be lonely; he thought it must be very unpleasant. *He* was never lonely in the wood.

“But then,” he said to himself, “I have all my friends in the wood, and Granny has none. Very likely if I had no friends I should be lonely too. I wonder what I can do about it.”

Then suddenly a bright idea struck him. “Why,” he thought, – “why should not my friends be Granny’s friends too? They are very amusing, I am sure. Why should I not bring them to see 12 Granny, and let them talk to her? She *couldn’t* be lonely then. I’ll go and see them this minute, and tell them all about it. I’m sure they will come.”

Full of his new idea, the boy sprang to his feet, and ran off in the direction of the wood. The grandmother called to him, “Toto! Toto! where are you going?” but he did not hear her. The good woman shook her head and went on with her knitting. “Let the dear child amuse himself as much as he can now. There’s little enough amusement in life.”

But Toto was not thinking of his own amusement this time. He ran straight to the wood, and entered it, threading his way quickly among the trees, as if he knew every step of the way, which, indeed, he did. At length, after going some way, he reached an open space, with trees all round it. Such a pretty place! The ground was carpeted with softest moss, into which the boy’s feet sunk so deep that they were almost covered; and all over the moss were sprinkled little star-shaped pink 13 flowers. The trees stood back a little from this pretty place, as I said; but their long branches met overhead, as they bent over to look down into – what do you think? – the loveliest little pool of water that ever was seen, I verily believe. A tiny pool, as round as if a huge giant had punched a hole for it with the end of his umbrella or walking-stick, and as clear as crystal. The edge of the pool was covered all round with plants and flowers, which seemed all to be trying to get a peep into the clear brown water. I have heard that these flowers growing round the pool had become excessively vain through looking so constantly at their own reflection, and that they gave themselves insufferable airs in consequence; but as this was only said by the flowers which did *not* grow near the pool, perhaps it was a slight exaggeration. They were certainly very pretty flowers, and I never wondered at their wanting to look at themselves. You see I have been in the wood, and know all about it.

It was in this pretty place that Toto stopped. 14 He sat down on a great cushion of moss near the pool, and began to whistle. Presently he heard a rustling in the tree-tops above his head. He stopped whistling and looked up expectantly. A beechnut fell plump on his nose, and he saw the sharp black eyes of a gray squirrel peering at him through the leaves.

“Hello, Toto!” said the squirrel. “Back again already? What’s the matter?”

“Come down here, and I’ll tell you,” said Toto.

The squirrel took a flying leap, and alighted on Toto’s shoulder. At the same moment a louder rustling was heard, among the bushes this time, a sound of cracking and snapping twigs, and presently

a huge black bear poked his nose out of the bushes, and sniffed inquiringly. “What’s up?” he asked. “I thought you fellows had gone home for the night, and I was just taking a nap.”

“So we had,” said Toto; “but I came back because I had something important to say. I 15 want to see you all on business. Where are the others?”

“Coon will be here in a minute,” answered the bear. “He stopped to eat the woodchuck’s supper. Chucky was so sound asleep it seemed a pity to miss such an opportunity. The birds have all flown away except the wood-pigeon, and she told me she would come as soon as she had fed her young ones. What’s your business, 16 Toto?” and Bruin sat down in a very comfortable attitude, and prepared to listen.

“Well,” said Toto, “it’s about my grandmother. You see, she – oh! here’s Coon! I’ll wait for him.” As he spoke, a large raccoon came out into the little dell. He was very handsome, with a most beautiful tail, but he looked sly and lazy. He winked at Toto, by way of greeting, and sat down by the pool, curling his tail round his legs, and then looking into the water to see if the effect was good. At the same moment a pretty wood-pigeon fluttered down, with a soft “Coo!” and settled on Toto’s other shoulder.

“Now then!” said the squirrel, flicking the boy’s nose with his tail, “go on, and tell us all about it!”

So Toto began again. “My grandmother, you see: she is blind; and she’s all alone most of the time when I’m out here playing with all of you, and it makes her lonely.”

“Lonely! What’s that?” asked the raccoon.

“I know what it is!” said the bear. “It’s 17 when there aren’t any blueberries, and you’ve hurt your paw so that you can’t climb. It’s a horrid feeling. Isn’t that it, Toto?”

“N-no, not exactly,” said Toto, “for my grandmother never climbs trees, anyhow. She hasn’t anybody to talk to, or listen to; nobody comes to see her, and she doesn’t know what is going on in the world. That’s what she means by ‘lonely.’”

“Humph!” said the raccoon, waving his tail thoughtfully. “Why don’t you both come and live in the wood? She couldn’t be lonely here, you know; and it would be very convenient for us all. I know a nice hollow tree that I could get for you not far from here. A wild-cat lives in it now, but if your grandmother doesn’t like wild-cats, the bear can easily drive him away. He’s a disagreeable fellow, and we shall be glad to get rid of him and have a pleasanter neighbor. Does – a – does your grandmother scratch?”

“No, certainly not!” said Toto indignantly. “She is the best grandmother in the world. 18 She never scratched anybody in her life, I am sure.”

“No offence, no offence,” said the raccoon. “My grandmother scratched, and I thought yours might. Most of them do, in my experience.”

“Besides,” Toto went on, “she wouldn’t like at all to live in a hollow tree. She is not used to that way of living, you see. Now, I have a plan, and I want you all to help me in it. In the morning Granny is busy, so she has not time to be lonely. It’s only in the afternoon, when she sits still and knits. So I say, why shouldn’t you all come over to the cottage in the afternoon, and talk to Granny instead of talking here to each other? I don’t mean *every* afternoon, of course, but two or three times a week. She would enjoy the stories and things as much as I do; and she would give you gingerbread, I’m sure she would; and perhaps jam too, if you were *very* good.”

“What’s gingerbread?” asked the bear. “And what’s jam? You do use such queer words sometimes, Toto.”

“Gingerbread?” said Toto. “Oh, it’s – well, it’s – why, it’s *gingerbread*, you know. You don’t have anything exactly like it, so I can’t exactly tell you. But there’s molasses in it, and ginger, and things; it’s good, anyhow, very good. And jam – well, jam is sweet, something like honey, only better. You will like it, I know, Bruin.

“Well, what do you all say? Will you come and try it?”

The bear looked at the raccoon; the raccoon looked at the squirrel; and the squirrel looked at the wood-pigeon. The pretty, gentle bird had not spoken before; but now, seeing all the other members of the party undecided, she answered quietly and softly, "Yes, Toto; I will come, and I am sure the others will, for they are all good creatures. You are a dear boy, and we shall all be glad to give pleasure to you or your grandmother."

The other creatures all nodded approval to the wood-pigeon's little speech, and Toto gave a sigh of relief and satisfaction. "That is settled, then," he said. "Thank you, dear pigeon, and thank you all. Now, when will you come? To-morrow afternoon? The sooner the better, I think."

The raccoon looked critically at his reflection in the water. "Chucky bit my ear yesterday," he said, "and it doesn't look very well for making visits. Suppose we wait till it is healed over. Nothing like making a good impression at first, you know."

"Nonsense, Coon!" growled the bear. "You are always thinking about your looks. I never saw such a fellow. Let us go to-morrow if we are going."

"Besides," said Toto, laughing, "Granny is blind, and will not know whether you have any ears or not, Master Coon. So I shall expect you all to-morrow. Good-by, all, and thank you very much." And away ran Toto, and away went all the rest to get their respective suppers.

CHAPTER II

“GRANNY,” said Toto the next day, when the afternoon shadows began to lengthen, “I am expecting some friends here this afternoon.”

“Some friends, Toto!” exclaimed his grandmother in astonishment. “My dear boy, what friend have you in the world except your old Granny? You are laughing at me.”

“No, I am not, Granny,” said the boy. “Of course you are the *best* friend, very much the best; but I have some other very good ones. And I have told them about your being lonely,” he went on hurriedly, glancing towards the wood, “and they are coming to see you this afternoon, to talk to you and tell you stories. In fact, I think I hear one of them coming now.”

“But *who are they?*” cried the astonished old woman, putting her hand up at the same time to settle her cap straight, and smoothing her apron, 22 in great trepidation at the approach of these unexpected visitors.

“Oh,” said Toto, “they are – here is one of them!” and he ran to meet the huge bear, who at that moment made his appearance, walking slowly and solemnly towards the cottage. He seemed ill at ease, and turned frequently to look back, in hopes of seeing his companions.

“Grandmother, this is my friend Bruin!” said Toto, leading the bear up to the horrified old lady. “I am very fond of Bruin,” he added, “and I hope you and he will be great friends. He tells the most *delightful* stories.”

Poor Granny made a trembling courtesy, and Bruin stood up on his hind-legs and rocked slowly backwards and forwards, which was the nearest approach he could make to a bow. (N. B. He looked so very formidable in this attitude, that if the old lady had seen him, she would certainly have fainted away. But she did not see, and Toto was used to it, and saw nothing out of the way in it.)

“Your servant, ma’am,” said the bear. “I hope I see you well.”

Granny courtesied again, and replied in a faltering voice, “Quite well, thank you, Mr. Bruin. It’s – it’s a fine day, sir.”

“It is indeed!” said the bear with alacrity. “It is a *very* fine day. I was just about to make the same remark myself. I – don’t know when I have seen a finer day. In fact, I don’t believe there ever *was* a finer day. A – yesterday was – a —*not* a fine day. A —

“Look here!” he added, in a low growl, aside to Toto, “I can’t stand much more of this. Where is Coon? He knows how to talk to people, and I don’t. I’m not accustomed to it. Now, when I go to see *my* grandmother, I take her a good bone, and she hits me on the head by way of saying thank you, and that’s all. I have a bone somewhere about me now,” said poor Bruin hesitatingly, “but I don’t suppose she – eh?”

“No, certainly not!” replied Toto promptly. “Not upon any account. And here’s Coon now, 24 and the others too, so you needn’t make any more fine speeches.”

Bruin, much relieved, sat down on his haunches, and watched the approach of his companions.

The raccoon advanced cautiously, yet with a very jaunty air. The squirrel was perched on his back, and the wood-pigeon fluttered about his head, in company with a very distinguished-looking gray parrot, with a red tail; while behind came a fat woodchuck, who seemed scarcely more than half-awake.

The creatures all paid their respects to Toto’s grandmother, each in his best manner; the raccoon professed himself charmed to make her acquaintance. “It is more than a year,” he said, “since I had the pleasure of meeting your accomplished grandson. I have esteemed it a high privilege to converse with him, and have enjoyed his society immensely. Now that I have the further happiness of becoming acquainted with his elegant and highly intellectual progenitress, I feel that I am indeed most fortunate. I – ”

But here Toto broke in upon the stream of eloquence. “Oh, *come*, Coon!” he cried, “your politeness is as bad as Bruin’s shyness. Why can’t we all be jolly, as we usually are? You need not be afraid of Granny.

“Come,” he continued, “let us have our story. We can all sit down in a circle, and fancy ourselves around the pool. Whose turn is it to-day? Yours, isn’t it, Cracker?”

“No,” said the squirrel. “It is Coon’s turn. I told my story yesterday.”

“You see, Granny,” said Toto, turning to his grandmother, “we take turns in telling stories, every afternoon. It is *such* fun! you’d like to hear a story, wouldn’t you, Granny?”

“Very much indeed!” replied the good woman. “Will you take a chair, Mr. – Mr. Coon?” she asked.

“Thank you, no,” replied the raccoon graciously. “My mother earth shall suffice me.” And sitting down, he curled up his tail in a very effective manner, and looked about him 26 meditatively, as if in search of a subject for his story.

“My natural diffidence,” he said, “will render it a difficult task, but still – ”

“Oh yes, we know!” said the squirrel. “Your natural diffidence is a fine thing. Go ahead, old fellow!”

At this moment Mr. Coon’s sharp eyes fell upon the poultry-yard, on the fence of which a fine Shanghai cock was sitting. His face lighted up, as if an idea had just struck him. “That is a very fine rooster, madam!” he said, addressing the grandmother, – “a remarkably fine bird. That bird, madam, reminds me strongly of the Golden-breasted Kootoo.”

“And what is the Golden-breasted Kootoo?” asked the grandmother.

The raccoon smiled, and looked slyly round upon his auditors, who had all assumed comfortable attitudes of listening, sure that the story was now coming.

“The story of the Golden-breasted Kootoo,” he 27 said, “was told to me several years ago by a distinguished foreigner, a learned and highly accomplished magpie, who formerly resided in this vicinity, but who is now, unhappily, no longer in our midst.”

“That’s a good one, that is!” whispered the wood chuck to Toto. “He ate that magpie about a year ago; said he loved her so much he couldn’t help it. What a fellow he is!”

“Hush!” said Toto. “He’s beginning!”






And Mr. Coon, dropping his airs and graces, told his story in tolerably plain language, as follows: —

THE GOLDEN-BREASTED KOOTOO


Once upon a time – and a good time it was – there lived a king. I do not know exactly what his name was, or just where he lived; but it doesn’t matter at all: his kingdom was somewhere between Ashantee and Holland, and his name sounded a little like Samuel, and a little like Dolabella, and a good deal like Chimborazo, and yet it was not quite 28 any of them. But, as I said before, it doesn’t matter. We will call him the King, and that will be all that is necessary, as there is no other king in the story.

This King was very fond of music; in fact, he was excessively fond of it. He kept four bands of music playing all day long. The first was a brass band, the second was a string band, the third was a rubber band, and the fourth was a man who played on the jews-harp. (Some people thought he ought not to be called a band, but he said he was all the jews-harp band there was, and that was very true.) The four bands played all day long on the four sides of the grand courtyard, and the king sat on a throne in the middle and transacted affairs of state. And when His Majesty went to bed at night, the grand chamberlain wound up a musical-box that was in his pillow, and another one in the top bureau-drawer, and they played “The Dog’s-meat Man” and “Pride of the Pirate’s Heart” till daylight did appear.

One day it occurred to the King that it would be 29 an excellent plan for him to learn to sing. He wondered that he had never thought of it before. “You see,” he said, “it would amuse me very much to sing while I am out hunting. I cannot take the bands with me to the forest, for they would frighten away the wild beasts; and I miss my music very much on such occasions. Yes, decidedly, I will learn to sing.”

So he sent for the Chief Musician, and ordered him to teach him to sing. The Chief Musician was delighted, and said they would begin at once. So he sat down at the piano, and struck a note. “O King,” he said, “please sing this note.” And the King sang, in a loud, deep voice,  The Chief Musician was enchanted. “Superb!” he cried. “Magnificent! Now, O King, please to sing *this* note!” and he struck another note:  The King sang, in a loud, deep voice,  The Chief Musician looked grave. “O King,” he said, “you did not quite understand me. We will try another note.” And he struck another:  The King sang, in a loud, deep voice,  The Chief Musician looked dejected. “I fear, O King,” he said, “that you can never learn to sing.” “What do you mean by that, Chief Musician?” asked the King. “It is your business to teach me to sing. Do you not know how to teach?” “No man knows better,” replied 31 the Chief Musician. “But Your Majesty has no ear for music. You never can sing but one note.”

At these words the King grew purple in the face. He said nothing, for he was a man of few words; but he rang a large bell, and an executioner appeared. “Take this man and behead him!” said the King. “And send me the Second Musician!”

The Second Musician came, looking very grave, for he had heard the shrieks of his unhappy superior as he was dragged off to execution, and he had no desire to share his fate. He bowed low, and demanded His Majesty’s pleasure. “Teach me to sing!” said His Majesty. So the Second Musician sat down at the piano, and tried several notes, just as the Chief Musician had done, and with the same result. Whatever note was struck, the King still sang, 

Now the Second Musician was a quick-witted fellow, and he saw in a moment what the trouble had been with his predecessor, and saw, too, what great peril he was in himself. So he assumed a 32 look of grave importance, and said solemnly, “O King, this is a very serious matter. I cannot conceal from you that there are great obstacles in the way of your learning to sing – ” The King looked at the bell. “But,” said the Second Musician, “they can be overcome.” The King looked away again. “I beg,” said the Second Musician, “for twenty-four hours’ time for consideration. At the end of that time I shall have decided upon the best method of teaching; and I am bound to say this to Your Majesty, that if you learn to sing – ” “What?” said the King, looking at the bell again. “That WHEN you learn to sing,” said the Second Musician hastily, – “*when* you learn to sing, your singing will be like no other that has ever been heard.” This pleased the King, and he graciously accorded the desired delay.

Accordingly the Second Musician took his leave with great humility, and spent all that night and the following day plunged in the deepest thought. As soon as the twenty-four hours had elapsed he again appeared before the King, who was awaiting 33 him impatiently, sitting on the music-stool. “Well?” said the King. “Quite well, O King, I thank you,” replied the Second Musician, “though somewhat fatigued by my labors.” “Pshaw!” said the King impatiently. “Have you found a way of teaching me to sing?” “I have, O King,” replied the Second Musician solemnly; “but it is not an easy way. Nevertheless it is the only one.” The King assured him that money was no object, and begged him to unfold his plan. “In order to learn to sing,” said the Second Musician, “you must eat a pie composed of all the singing-birds in the world. In this way only can the difficulty of your having no natural ear for music be overcome. If a single bird is omitted, or if you do not consume the whole pie, the charm will have no effect. I leave Your Majesty to judge of the difficulty of the undertaking.”

Difficulty? The King would not admit that there was such a word. He instantly summoned his Chief Huntsman, and ordered him to send other huntsmen to every country in the world, to 34 bring

back a specimen of every kind of singing-bird. Accordingly, as there were sixty countries in the world at that time, sixty huntsmen started off immediately, fully armed and equipped.

After they were gone, the King, who was very impatient, summoned his Wise Men, and bade them look in all the books, and find out how many kinds of singing-birds there were in the world. The Wise Men all put their spectacles on their noses, and their noses into their books, and after studying a long time, and adding up on their slates the number of birds described in each book, they found that there were in all nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine varieties of singing-birds.

They made their report to the King, and he was rather troubled by it; for he remembered that the Second Musician had said he must eat every morsel of the pie himself, or the charm would have no effect. It would be a *very* large pie, he thought, with nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine birds in it. "The only way," he 35 said to himself, "will be for me to eat as little as possible until the huntsmen come back; then I shall be very hungry. I have never been *very* hungry in my life, so there is no knowing how much I could eat if I were." So the King ate nothing from one week's end to another, except bread and dripping; and by the time the huntsmen returned he was so thin that it was really shocking.

At last, after a long time, the sixty huntsmen returned, laden down with huge bags, the contents of which they piled up in a great heap in the middle of the courtyard. A mountain of birds! Such a thing had never been seen before. The mountain was so high that everybody thought the full number of birds must be there; and the Chief Cook began to make his preparations, and sent to borrow the garden roller from John the gardener, as his own was not big enough to roll out such a quantity of paste.

The King and the Wise Men next proceeded to count the birds. But alas! what was their sorrow 36 to find that the number fell short by one! They counted again and again; but it was of no use: there were only nine thousand nine hundred and ninety-eight birds in the pile.

The next thing was to find out what bird was missing. So the Wise Men sorted all the birds, and compared them with the pictures in the books, and studied so hard that they wore out three pairs of spectacles apiece; and at last they discovered that the missing bird was the "Golden breasted Kootoo." The chief Wise Man read aloud from the biggest book: —

"The Golden-breasted Kootoo, the most beautiful and the most melodious of singing birds, is found only in secluded parts of the Vale of Coringo. Its plumage is of a brilliant golden yellow, except on the back, where it is streaked with green. Its beak is —"

"There! there!" interrupted the King impatiently; "never mind about its beak. Tell the Lord Chamberlain to pack my best wig and a clean shirt, and send them after me by a courier; and, 37 Chief Huntsman, follow me. We start this moment for the Vale of Coringo!"

And actually, if you will believe it, the King *did* start off in less than an hour from the counting of the birds. He rode on horseback, and was accompanied only by the Chief Huntsman and the jews-harp band, the courier being obliged to wait for the King's best wig to be curled.

The poor Band had a hard time of it; for he had a very frisky horse, and found it extremely difficult to manage the beast with one hand and hold the jews-harp with the other; but the King, with much ingenuity, fastened the head of the horse to the tail of his own steady cob, thereby enabling the musician to give all his attention to his instrument. The music was a trifle jerky at times; but what of that? It was music, and the King was satisfied.

They rode night and day, and at length arrived at the Vale of Coringo, and took lodgings at the principal hotel. The King was very weary, as he had been riding for a week without stopping. So he went to bed at once, and slept for two whole days.

On the morning of the third day he was roused from a wonderful dream (in which he was singing a duet with the Golden-breasted Kootoo, to a jews-harp accompaniment) by the sound of music. The King sat up in bed, and listened. It was a bird's song that he heard, and it seemed to come from the vines outside his window. But what a song it was! And what a bird it must be that could utter such wondrous sounds! He listened, too enchanted to move, while the magical song swelled louder

and clearer, filling the air with melody. At last he rose, and crept softly to the window. There, on a swinging vine, sat a beautiful bird, all golden yellow, with streaks of green on its back. It was 40 the Golden-breasted Kootoo! There could be no doubt about it, even if its marvellous song had not announced it as the sweetest singer of the whole world. Very quietly, but trembling with excitement, the King put on his slippers and his flowered dressing-gown, and seizing his gun, he hastily descended the stairs.

It was early dawn, and nobody was awake in the hotel except the Boots, who was blacking his namesakes in the back hall. He saw the King come down, and thought he had come to get his boots; but the monarch paid no attention to him, quietly unbolted the front door, and slipped out into the garden. Was he too late? Had the bird flown? No, the magic song still rose from the vines outside his chamber-window. But even now, as the King approached, a fluttering was heard, and the Golden-breasted Kootoo, spreading its wings, flew slowly away over the garden wall, and away towards the mountain which rose just behind the hotel. The King followed, clambering painfully over the high wall, and leaving fragments 41 of his brocade dressing-gown on the sharp spikes which garnished it. Once over, he made all speed, and found that he could well keep the bird in sight, for it was flying very slowly. A provoking bird it was, to be sure! It would fly a little way, and then, alighting on a bush or hanging spray, would pour forth a flood of melody, as if inviting its pursuer to come nearer; but before the unhappy King could get within gunshot, it would flutter slowly onward, keeping just out of reach, and uttering a series of mocking notes, which seemed to laugh at his efforts. On and on flew the bird, up the steep mountain; on and on went the King in pursuit. It is all very well to *fly* up a mountain; but to crawl and climb up, with a heavy gun in one's hand, and one's dressing-gown catching on every sharp point of rock, and the tassel of one's nightcap bobbing into one's eyes, is a very different matter, I can tell you. But the King never thought of stopping for an instant; not he! He lost first one slipper, and then the other; the cord and tassels of his dressing-gown 42 tripped him up, so that he fell and almost broke his nose; and finally his gun slipped from his hold and went crashing down over a precipice; but still the King climbed on and on, breathless but undaunted.

At length, at the very top of the mountain, as it seemed, the bird made a longer pause than usual. It lighted on a point of rock, and folding its wings, seemed really to wait for the King, singing, meanwhile, a song of the most inviting and encouraging description. Nearer and nearer crept the King, and still the bird did not move. He was within arm's-length, and was just stretching out his arm to seize the prize, when it fluttered off the rock. Frantic with excitement, the King made a desperate clutch after it, and —

PART II

At eight o'clock the landlady knocked at the King's door. "Hot water, Your Majesty," she said. "Shall I bring the can in? And the Band desires his respects, and would you wish him to 43 play while you are a-dressing, being as you didn't bring a music-box with you?"

Receiving no answer, after knocking several times, the good woman opened the door very cautiously, and peeped in, fully expecting to see the royal nightcap reposing calmly on the pillow. What was her amazement at finding the room empty; no sign of the King was to be seen, although his pink-silk knee-breeches lay on a chair, and his ermine mantle and his crown were hanging on a peg against the wall.

The landlady gave the alarm at once. The King had disappeared! He had been robbed, murdered; the assassins had chopped him up into little pieces and carried him away in a bundle-handkerchief! "Murder! police! fire!!!!"

In the midst of the wild confusion the voice of the Boots was heard. "Please, 'm, I see His Majesty go out at about five o'clock this morning."

Again the chorus rose: he had run away; he had gone to surprise and slay the King of Coringo 44 while he was taking his morning chocolate; he had gone to take a bath in the river, and was drowned! “Murder! police!”

The voice of the Boots was heard again. “And please, ’m, he’s a sittin’ out in the courtyard now; and please, ’m, I think he’s crazy!”

Out rushed everybody, pell-mell, into the courtyard. There, on the ground, sat the King, with his tattered dressing-gown wrapped majestically about him. An ecstatic smile illuminated his face, while he clasped in his arms a large bird with shining plumage.

“Bless me!” cried the poultry-woman. “If he hasn’t got my Shanghai rooster that I couldn’t catch last night!”

The King, hearing voices, looked round, and smiled graciously on the astonished crowd. “Good people,” he said, “success has crowned my efforts. I have found the Golden-breasted Kootoo! You shall all have ten pounds apiece, in honor of this joyful event, and the landlady shall be made a baroness in her own right!”

“But,” said the poultry-woman, “it is my Shang – ”

“Be still, you idiot!” whispered the landlady, putting her hand over the woman’s mouth. “Do you want to lose your ten pounds and your head too? If the King has caught the Golden-breasted Kootoo, why, then it *is* the Golden-breasted Kootoo, as sure as I am a baroness!” and she added in a still lower tone, “There hasn’t been a Kootoo seen in the Vale for ten years; the birds have died out.”

Great were the rejoicings at the palace when the King returned in triumph, bringing with him the much-coveted prize, the Golden-breasted Kootoo. The bands played until they almost killed themselves; the cooks waved their ladles and set to work at once on the pie; the huntsmen sang hunting-songs. All was joy and rapture, except in the breast of one man; that man was the Second Musician, or, as we should now call him, the Chief Musician. He felt no thrill of joy at sight of the wondrous bird; on the contrary, he made his 46 will, and prepared to leave the country at once; but when the pie was finished, and he saw its huge dimensions, he was comforted. “No man,” he said to himself, “can eat the whole of that pie and live!”

Alas! he was right. The unhappy King fell a victim to his musical ambition before he had half finished his pie, and died in a fit. His subjects ate the remainder of the mighty pasty, with mingled tears and smiles, as a memorial feast; and if the Golden-breasted Kootoo *was* a Shanghai rooster, nobody in the kingdom was ever the wiser for it.

CHAPTER III

THE raccoon's story was received with general approbation; and the grandmother, in particular, declared she had not passed so pleasant an hour for a very long time. The good woman was gradually becoming accustomed to her strange visitors, and ventured to address them with a little more freedom, though she still trembled and clutched her knitting-needles tighter when she heard the bear's deep tones.

"It is really very good of you all," she said, "to take compassion upon my loneliness. Before I came to this cottage I lived in a large town, where I had many friends, and I find the change very great, and the life here very solitary. Indeed, if it were not for my dear little Toto, I should lead quite the life of a hermit."

"What is a hermit?" asked the bear, who had 48 an inquiring mind, and liked to know the meaning of words.

"It is a crab," said the parrot. "I have often seen them in the West Indies. They get into the shells of other crabs, and drive the owners out. A wretched set!"

"Oh, dear!" cried the grandmother. "That is not at all the kind of hermit I mean. A hermit in this country is a man who lives quite alone, without any companions, in some uninhabited region, such as a wood or a lonely hillside."

"Is it?" exclaimed the bear and the squirrel at the same moment. "Why, then, we know one."

"Certainly," the squirrel went on; "Old Baldhead must be a hermit, of course. He lives alone, and in an uninhabited region; that is, what *you* would call uninhabited, I suppose."

"How very interesting! Where does he live?" asked Toto. "Who is he? How is it that I have never seen him?"

"Oh, he lives quite at the other end of the wood!" replied the squirrel; "some ten miles or 49 more from here. You have never been so far, my dear boy, and Old Baldhead isn't likely to come into our part of the wood. He paid us one visit several years ago, and that was enough for him, eh, Bruin?"

"Humph! I think so!" said Bruin, smiling grimly. "He seemed quite satisfied, I thought."

"Tell us about his visit!" cried Toto eagerly. "I have never heard anything about him, and I know it must be funny, or you would not chuckle so, Bruin."

"Well," said the bear, "there isn't much to tell, but you shall hear all I know. *I* call that hermit, if that is his name, a very impudent fellow. Just fancy this, will you? One evening, late in the autumn, about three years ago, I was coming home from a long ramble, very tired and hungry. I had left a particularly nice comb of honey and some other little things in my cave, all ready for supper, for I knew when I started that I should be late, and I was looking forward to a very comfortable evening.

"Well, when I came to the door of my cave, what should I see but an old man with a long gray beard, sitting on the ground eating my honey!" Here the bear looked around with a deeply injured air, and there was a general murmur of sympathy.

"Your course was obvious!" said the raccoon. "Why didn't you eat him, stupid?"

"Hush!" whispered the wood-pigeon softly. "You must not say things like that, Coon! you will frighten the old lady." And indeed, the grandmother seemed much discomposed by the raccoon's suggestion.

"Wouldn't have been polite!" replied Bruin. "My own house, you know, and all that. Besides," he added in an undertone, with an apprehensive glance at the grandmother, "he was old, and probably very –"

"Ahem!" said Toto in a warning voice.

"Oh, certainly not!" said the bear hastily, "not upon any account. I was about to make the same remark myself. A – where was I?"

"The old man was eating your honey," said the woodchuck.

“Of course!” replied Bruin. “So, though I would not have hurt him *for the world*” (with another glance towards the grandmother), “I thought there would be no harm in frightening him a little. Accordingly, I first made a great noise among the bushes, snapping the twigs and rustling the leaves at a great rate. He stopped eating, and looked and listened, listened and looked; didn’t seem to like it much, I thought. Then, when he was pretty thoroughly roused, I came slowly forward, and planted myself directly in front of the cave.”

“Dear me!” cried the grandmother. “How very dreadful! poor old man!”

“Well now, ma’am!” said Bruin appealingly, “he had no right to steal my honey; now had he? And I didn’t hurt a hair of his head,” he continued. “I only stood up on my hind-legs and waved my fore-paws round and round like a windmill, and roared.”

A general burst of merriment greeted this statement, from all except the grandmother, who shuddered in sympathy with the unfortunate hermit.

“Well?” asked Toto, “and what did he do then?”

“Why,” said Bruin, “he crouched down in a little heap on the ground, and squeezed himself against the wall of the cave, evidently expecting me to rush upon him and tear him to pieces; I sat down in front of him and looked at him for a few minutes; then, when I thought he had had about enough, I walked past him into the cave, and then he ran away. He has never made me another visit.”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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