

Richards Laura Elizabeth Howe

Toto's Merry Winter



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Содержание

CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	9
CHAPTER III	18
CHAPTER IV	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

Laura E. Richards

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CHAPTER I

IT was evening, – a good, old-fashioned winter evening, cold without, warm and merry within. The snow was falling lightly, softly, with no gusts of wind to trouble it and send it whirling and drifting hither and thither. It covered the roof with a smooth white counterpane, tucking it in neatly and carefully round the edges; it put a tall conical cap on top of the pump, and laid an ermine fold over his long and impressive nose. Myriads of curious little flakes pattered softly – oh! very softly – against the windows of the cottage, pressing against the glass to see what was going on inside, and saying, "Let us in! let us in! please do!" But nobody seemed inclined to let them in, so they were forced to content themselves with looking.

Indeed, the aspect of the kitchen was very inviting, and it is no wonder that the little cold flakes wanted to get in. A great fire was crackling and leaping on the hearth. The whole room seemed to glow and glitter: brass saucepans, tin platters, glass window-panes, all cast their very brightest glances toward the fire, to show him that they appreciated his efforts. Over this famous fire, in the very midst of the dancing, flickering tongues of yellow flame, hung a great black soup-kettle, which was almost boiling over with a sense of its own importance, and a kindly consciousness of the good things cooking inside it.

"Bubble! b-r-r-r-r! bubble! hubble!" said the black kettle, with a fat and spluttering enunciation.

"Bubble, hubble! b-r-r-r-r-r-r! bubble!
Lots of fun, and very little trouble!"

On the hob beside the fire sat the tea-kettle, a brilliant contrast to its sooty neighbor. It was of copper, so brightly burnished that it shone like the good red gold. The tea-kettle did not bubble, – it considered bubbling rather vulgar; but it was singing very merrily, in a clear pleasant voice, and pouring out volumes of steam from its slender copper nose. "I am doing all I can to make myself agreeable!" the tea-kettle said to itself. "I am boiling just right, – hard enough to make a good cheerful noise, and not so hard as to boil all the water away. And *why* that beast should sit and glower at me there as he is doing, is more than I can understand."

"That beast" was a raccoon. I think some of you children may have seen him before. He was sitting in front of the fire, with his beautiful tail curled comfortably about his toes; and he certainly *was* staring very hard at the tea-kettle. Presently the kettle, in pure playfulness and good-will, lifted its cover a little and let out an extra puff of snowy steam; and at that the raccoon gave a jump, and moved farther away from the fire, without ever taking his eyes off the kettle.

The fact is, that for the first time in his life the raccoon knew what *fear* was. He was afraid – mortally afraid – of that tea-kettle.

"Don't tell me!" he had said to Toto, only the day before, "don't tell *me* it isn't alive! It breathes, and it talks, and it moves, and if that isn't being alive I don't know what is."

"Coon, how utterly absurd you are!" cried Toto, laughing. "It *doesn't* move, except when some one takes it up, of course, or tilts it on the hob."

"Toto," said the raccoon, speaking slowly and impressively, "as sure as you are a living boy, I saw that kettle take off the top of its head and look out of its own inside, only last night. And before that," he added, looking rather shamefaced, "I – I just put my paw in to see what there was inside, and the creature caught it and took all the skin off."

But here Toto burst into a fit of laughter, and said, "Served you right!" which was so rude that the raccoon went off and sat under the table, in a huff.

So this time, when the kettle took off the top of its head, Coon did not run out into the shed, as he had done before, because he was ashamed when he remembered Toto's laughter. He only moved away a little, and looked and felt thoroughly uncomfortable.

But now steps were heard outside. The latch clicked, the door opened, and Toto and Bruin entered, each carrying a foaming pail of milk. They brushed the snow from their coats, and Toto took off his, which the good bear could not well do; then, when they had carried their milk-pails into the dairy, they came and sat down by the fire, with an air of being ready to enjoy themselves. The raccoon winked at them by way of greeting, but did not speak.

"Well, Coon," said Bruin, in his deep bass voice, "what have you been doing all the afternoon? Putting your tail in curl-papers, eh?"

"Not at all," replied the raccoon with dignity, "I have been sweeping the hearth; sweeping it," he added, with a majestic curl of his tail, "in a manner which *some* people [here he glanced superciliously at the bear] could hardly manage."

"I am sure," said the boy Toto, holding out his hands toward the ruddy fire-blaze, "it is a blessing that Bruin has no tail. Just fancy how he would go knocking things about! Why, it would be two yards long, if it were in the same proportion as yours, Coon!"

"Hah!" said the raccoon, yawning, "very likely. And what have you two been doing, pray, since dinner?"

"I have been splitting kindling-wood," said Toto, "and building a snow fort, and snowballing Bruin. And he has –"

"I have been talking to the pig," said Bruin, very gravely. "The pig. Yes. He is a very singular animal, that pig. Is it true," he added, turning to Toto, "that he has never left that place, that sty, since he was born?"

"Never, except to go into the yard by the cow-shed," said Toto. "His sty opens into the yard, you know. But I don't think he cares to go out often."

"That is what he said," rejoined the bear. "That is what struck me as so very strange. He said he never went out, from one winter to another. And when I asked why, he snorted, and said, 'For fear the wind should blow my bristles off.' Said it in a very rude way, you know. I don't think his manners are good. I shall not go to see him again, except in the way of taking his food to him. But here we sit, talking," continued the bear, rising, "when we ought to be getting supper. Come! come! you lazy fellows, and help me set the table."

With this, the good bear proceeded to tie a huge white apron round his great black, shaggy body, and began to poke the fire, and to stir the contents of the soup-kettle with a long wooden spoon, – all with a very knowing air, as if he had done nothing but cook all his life. Meanwhile, the raccoon and Toto spread a clean cloth on the table, and set out cups and plates, a huge brown bowl for the bear, a smaller one for the raccoon, etc. Bread and milk, and honey and baked apples came next; the soup-kettle yielded up a most savory stew, made of everything good, and onions besides; and finally, when all was ready, Toto ran and knocked at the door of his grandmother's room, crying, "Granny, dear! supper is ready, and we are only waiting for you."

The door opened, and the blind grandmother came out, with the little squirrel perched on her shoulder.

"Good evening to you all!" she said, with her sweet smile and her pretty little old-fashioned courtesy. "We have been taking a nap, Cracker and I, and we feel quite refreshed and ready for the evening."

The grandmother looked ten years younger, Toto was constantly telling her, than she did the year before; and, indeed, it was many years since she had had such a pleasant, easy life. Helpful as Toto had always been to her, still, he was only a little boy, though a very good one; and by far the larger

share of work had fallen to the old lady herself. But now there were willing hands – paws, I should say – to help her at every turn. The bear washed and cooked, churned and scrubbed, with never-tiring energy and good-will. The raccoon worked very hard indeed: he said so, and nobody took the trouble to contradict him. He swept the kitchen occasionally, and did a good deal of graceful and genteel dusting with his long bushy tail, and tasted all the food that Bruin cooked, to see if it had the proper flavor. Besides these heavy duties, he caught rats, teased the cow, pulled the parrot's tail whenever he got a chance, and, as he expressed it, "tried to make things pleasant generally." The little squirrel had constituted himself a special attendant on "Madam," as the forest-friends all called the grandmother. He picked up her ball of yarn when it rolled off her lap, as it was constantly doing. He cracked nuts for her, brought her the spices and things when she made her famous gingerbread, and went to sleep in her ample pocket when he had nothing else to do. As for the wood-pigeon and the parrot, they were happy and contented, each in her own way, each on her own comfortable perch, at her own window.

Thus had all Toto's summer playmates become winter friends, fast and true; and it would be difficult to find a happier party than that which gathered round the bright fire, on this and every other evening, when the tea-things were put away, the hearth newly swept, and a great tin-pan full of nuts and apples placed on the clean hearth-stone. Only one of the animals whom you remember in Toto's summer story was missing from the circle; that was the woodchuck. But he was not very far off. If you had looked into a certain little cupboard near the fireplace, – a quaint little cupboard, in which lived three blue ginger-jars and a great pewter tankard, – you would have seen, lying in the warmest corner, next the fireplace, something which looked at first sight like a large knitted ball of red yarn. On looking closer, you would have seen that it was a ball of brown fur, enclosed in a knitted covering. If you had taken off the covering and unrolled the ball, you would have found that it was a woodchuck, sound asleep.

Poor Chucky had found it quite impossible to accept the new arrangement. He had always been in the habit of sleeping all through the winter; and while the other animals had succeeded, after a long time, in conquering their sleepiness (though it was still a very common thing to find Bruin asleep over the churn, and Coon had a way of creeping into Toto's bed at odd times during the day), the woodchuck had succumbed entirely after the first week, and had now been asleep for a couple of months. At first, after he had dropped into his long slumber, the bear and the raccoon had played ball with him a good deal, tossing him about with great agility. But one day the living ball had fallen into the soup-kettle, where the water was so hot as to elicit a miserable sleepy squeak from the victim, and the grandmother had promptly forbidden the game. It was then that she knit the red-worsted cover for poor Chucky, for she said she could not bear to think of his sleeping all winter with nothing over him; and she put him away in the cupboard by the fireplace, and wished him pleasant dreams as she closed the door. So there the woodchuck lay, warm and comfortable, but too sound asleep to know anything about it. And the three blue ginger-jars and the pewter tankard kept watch over him, though they had their own ideas about this stranger having been popped in among them without so much as saying, "By your leave!"

As I was saying, it was a happy party that sit around the blazing fire. The grandmother in her high-backed armchair, knitting in hand; Toto sitting Turk-fashion on the hearth-rug, his curly head resting on the shaggy coat of the bear, who sat solemnly on his haunches, blinking with sober pleasure at the fire; the raccoon on a low hassock, which was his favorite seat in the evening, as it showed off his tail to great advantage; the parrot and the wood-pigeon perched on the high chair-back, and standing on one leg or two, as they felt inclined.

"Ah!" exclaimed the little squirrel, who had stationed himself on the top of Bruin's head, as a convenient and suitable place, "Ah! now this is what *I* call comfort. Snowing fast outside, isn't it, Bruin?"

"Yes!" replied the bear.

"That makes it all the more jolly inside!" said the squirrel. "What are we to do this evening? Is it a story evening, or dancing-school and games?"

"We had dancing-school last night," said the bear. "I haven't got over it yet. I backed into the fire twice in 'forward and back, and cross over.' Let us have a story to-night."

"Yes!" said the grandmother. "It is just the night for a story; and if you wish it, I will tell you one myself."

"Oh! please, Madam!" "Thank you, Madam!" "Hurrah! Granny!" resounded on all sides, for the grandmother's stories were very popular; so, settling herself back in her chair, and beginning a new row in her knitting, the good woman said: —

"This story was told to me by my own grandmother. A story that has been told by two grandmothers in succession is supposed to be always true; you may therefore believe as much of this as you like."

And without further preface, she began as follows: —

CHAPTER II

THE STORY OF CHOP-CHIN AND THE GOLDEN DRAGON

ONCE upon a time, long ago and long ago, there lived in Peking, which, as you all know, is the chief city of the Chinese Empire, a boy whose name was Chop-Chin. He was the son of Ly-Chee, a sweeper of the Imperial court-yard, whose duty it was to keep the pavement of the court-yard always absolutely clean, in case His Celestial Majesty, the Emperor, should feel inclined to put his celestial and majestic nose out-of-doors. Chop-Chin hoped to become a sweeper also, when he was a little older; but at the time when my story begins he was only twelve years old, and the law required that all sweepers should have passed their fourteenth year. So Chop-Chin helped his mother about the house, – for he was a good boy, – carried his father's dinner to him, and made himself generally useful.

One day Chop-Chin entered the court-yard at the usual time, carrying a jar of rice on his head, and a melon in one hand. These were for his father's dinner, and setting them down in a shaded corner, on the cool white marble pavement, he looked about for his father. But Ly-Chee was nowhere to be seen. A group of sweepers stood at the farther end of the court-yard, talking together in a state of wild excitement, with many gestures. One of them drew his hand across his throat rapidly, and they all shuddered. Some one was to be killed, then? Chop-Chin wondered what it all meant. Suddenly one of the group caught sight of him, and at once they fell silent. Two or three, who were friends of his father, began to wring their hands and tear their clothes, and the oldest sweeper of all advanced solemnly toward the boy, holding out both his hands, with the palms downward, in token of sympathy.

"My son," he said, "what is man's life but a string of beads, which at one time or another must be broken? Shall the wise man disquiet himself whether more or fewer beads have passed over the hand?"

"What words are these?" cried Chop-Chin, alarmed, though he knew not why. "Why do you look and speak so strangely, Yow-Lay; and where is my father?"

The old sweeper led the boy to a stone bench, and bade him sit down beside him. "Thou knowest," he said, "that the first duty of us sweepers is to keep the court-yard always as clean as the sky after rain, and as white as the breath of the frost."

"I know it well," replied the boy. "Does not my father wear out two pairs of scrubbing-shoes in a month –"

"Scrubbing-shoes, Granny?" said Toto, softly. "I didn't mean to interrupt, but what *are* scrubbing-shoes?"

"I remember asking the same question at your age, Toto," said the old lady, "and my grandmother told me that the sweepers always wore shoes with very thick soles, in which stiff bristles were fastened as in a scrubbing-brush. It was their custom to dash the water in bucketfuls over the pavement, and then dance violently about, scrubbing with their feet as hard as they could."

"Oh, what fun!" cried Toto. "Mayn't we try it some day, Granny? I'll fasten four brushes to your feet, Coon, and you can scrub the floor every day."

"Thank you, kindly!" said the raccoon. "If you can get the brushes on my feet, I will pledge myself to dance in them. That is certainly fair."

He winked slyly at Toto, while the grandmother continued: —

"Alas! my son," said the old man, "your father will wear out no more scrubbing-shoes. Listen! This morning, while we were all busily at work, it chanced through some evil fate that His Celestial Majesty felt a desire to taste the freshness of the morning air. Unannounced he came, with only the Princely Parasol-Holder, the Unique Umbrella-Opener, and seven boys to hold up his celestial train.

You know that your father is slightly deaf? Yes. Well, he stood – my good friend Ly-Chee – he stood with his back to the palace. He heard not the noise of the opening door, and at the very moment when His Celestial Majesty stepped out into the court-yard, Ly-Chee cast a great bucketful of ice-cold water backward, with fatal force and precision."

Chop-Chin shuddered, and hid his face in his hands.

"Picture to yourself the dreadful scene!" continued the ancient sweeper. "The Celestial Petticoat, of yellow satin damask, was drenched. The Celestial Shoes, of chicken-skin embroidered in gold, were reduced to a pulp. A shriek burst from every mouth! Your unhappy father turned, and seeing what he had done, fell on his face, as did all the rest of us. In silence we waited for the awful voice, which presently said: —

"'Princely Parasol-Holder, our feet are wet.'

"The Princely Parasol-Holder groaned, and chattered his teeth together to express his anguish.

"'Unique Umbrella-Opener,' continued the Emperor, 'our petticoat is completely saturated.'

"The Unique Umbrella-Opener tore his clothes, and shook his hair wildly about his face, with moans of agony.

"'Let this man's head be removed at sunrise to-morrow!' concluded His Celestial Majesty.

"Then we all, lying on our faces, wept and cried aloud, and besought the celestial mercy for our comrade. We told the Emperor of Ly-Chee's long and faithful service; of his upright and devout life; of his wife and children, who looked to him for their daily bread. But all was of no avail. He repeated, in dreadful tones, his former words: —

"'Our feet are wet. Our petticoat is saturated. Let this man's head be removed at sunrise to-morrow.'

"Then the Unique Umbrella-Holder, who is a kindly man, made also intercession for Ly-Chee. But now the Emperor waxed wroth, and he said: —

"'Are our clothes to be changed, or do we stand here all day in wetness because of this dog? We swear that unless the Golden Dragon himself come down from his altar and beg for this man's life, he shall die! Enough!' And with these words he withdrew into the palace.

"So thou seest, my son," said the old man, sadly, "that all is over with thy poor father. He is now in the prison of the condemned, and to-morrow at sunrise he must die. Go home, boy, and comfort thy poor mother, telling her this sad thing as gently as thou mayest."

Chop-Chin arose, kissed the old man's hand in token of gratitude for his kindness, and left the court-yard without a word. His head was in a whirl, and strange thoughts darted through it. He went home, but did not tell his mother of the fate which awaited her husband on the morrow. He could not feel that it was true. It *could not be* that the next day, all in a moment, his father would cease to live. There must be some way, —*some* way to save him. And then he seemed to hear the dreadful words, "Unless the Golden Dragon himself come down from his altar and beg for this man's life, he shall die." He told his mother, in answer to her anxious questions, that his father meant to pass the night in the court-yard, as he would be wanted very early in the morning; and as it was a hot day, and promised a warm night, the good woman felt no uneasiness, but turned again to her pots and pans.

But Chop-Chin sat on the bench in front of the house, with his head in his hands thinking deeply.

That evening, at sunset, a boy was seen walking slowly along the well-paved street which led to the great temple of the Golden Dragon. He was clad in a snow-white tunic falling to his knees; his arms and legs were bare; and his pig-tail, unbraided and hanging in a crinkly mass below his waist, showed that he was bent on some sacred mission. In his hands, raised high above his head, he carried a bronze bowl of curious workmanship. Many people turned to look at the boy, for his face and figure were of singular beauty.

"He carries the prayers of some great prince," they said, "to offer at the shrine of the Golden Dragon."

And, indeed, it was at the great bronze gate of the Temple that the boy stopped. Poising the bronze bowl gracefully on his head with one hand, with the other he knocked three times on the gate. It opened, and revealed four guards clad in black armor, who stood with glittering pikes crossed, their points towards the boy.

"What seekest thou," asked the leader, "in the court of the Holy Dragon?"

Chop-Chin (for I need not tell you the boy was he) lowered the bowl from his head, and offered it to the soldier with a graceful reverence.

"Tong-Ki-Tcheng," he said, "sends you greeting, and a draught of cool wine. He begs your prayers to the Holy Dragon that he may recover from his grievous sickness, and prays that I may pass onward to the shrine."

The guards bowed low at the name of Tong-Ki-Tcheng, a powerful Prince of the Empire, who lay sick of a fever in his palace, as all the city knew. Each one in turn took a draught from the deep bowl, and the leader said: —

"Our prayers shall go up without ceasing for Tong-Ki-Tcheng, the noble and great. Pass on, fair youth, and good success go with thee!"

They lowered their pikes, and Chop-Chin passed slowly through the court-yard paved with black marble, and came to the second gate, which was of shining steel. Here he knocked again, and the gate was opened by four guards clad in steel from top to toe, and glittering in the evening light.

"What seekest thou," they asked, "in the court of the Holy Dragon?"

Chop-Chin answered as before: —

"Tong-Ki-Tcheng sends you greeting, and a draught of cool wine. He begs your prayers to the Holy Dragon that he may recover from his grievous sickness, and prays that I may pass onward to the shrine."

The guards drank deeply from the bowl, and their leader replied: "Our prayers shall not cease to go up for Tong-Ki-Tcheng. Pass on, and good success go with thee!"

Onward the boy went, holding the bronze bowl high above his head. He crossed the white marble court-yard, and his heart beat when he came to the third gate, which was of whitest ivory, for he knew that beyond the third court-yard was the Temple itself, – the House of Gold, in which dwelt the mighty Dragon, the most sacred idol in all China. He paused a moment, and then with a steady hand knocked at the gate. It opened without a sound, and there stood four guards in white armor inlaid with gold. The same questions and answers were repeated. They drank from the bowl, promised their prayers for Tong-Ki-Tcheng, and then bade the boy pass onward to the golden gate, which gleamed at the farther end of the court-yard.

"But see that thou touch not the gate!" said the chief soldier. "It is the gate of the Temple itself, and no profane hand may rest upon it. Speak only, and the priests will hear and open to thee."

Softly Chop-Chin paced across the last court, which was paved with blocks of ivory and silver, laid in cunning patterns. Halting before the gate of gold, he raised the bowl in his hands, and said softly: —

"Ka Ho Yai! Yai Nong Ti!
Tong-Ki-Tcheng Lo Hum Ki Ni!"

The gates opened, and showed four priests in robes of cloth-of-gold, with golden censers in hand.

"Rash youth!" said the chief priest, "by what right or by whose order comest thou here, to the Sacred Shrine of the Holy Dragon?"

Chop-Chin knelt upon the threshold of the golden gate, and, with bowed head and downcast eyes, held out the bronze bowl.

"By the right of mortal sickness, most holy priest, come I hither!" he said, "and by order of the noble Tong-Ki-Tcheng. He prays thee and thy brethren to drink to his recovery from his grievous malady, and that your prayers may go up with mine at the Jewelled Shrine itself."

The priest drank solemnly from the bowl, and handed it to his assistants, the last of whom drained the last drop of wine.

"Our prayers shall truly go up for Tong-Ki-Tcheng," he said. "Give me thy hand, fair youth, and I will lead thee to the Jewelled Shrine. But first I will cover thine eyes, for none save ourselves, priests of the First Order of the Saki-Pan, may look upon the face of the Holy Dragon."

So saying, he bound a silk handkerchief firmly over the boy's eyes, and taking his hand, led him slowly forward.

Chop-Chin's heart was beating so violently that he was half suffocated. He felt the floor suddenly cold, cold, beneath his feet, and knew that he was walking on the golden floor of the Temple. A few steps farther, the hand of the priest drew him downward, and together with the four priests he lay prostrate on his face before the shrine of the Golden Dragon.

A great silence followed. The warm, incense-laden air was stirred by no sound save the breathing of the five suppliants. No breeze rustled the heavy satin curtains which shrouded the windows; no hum of insect or song of bird came from the outer world, which was fast settling down into night.

Silence!

The boy Chop-Chin lay as still as if he were carved in marble. He held his breath from time to time, and his whole being seemed strained to one effort, – that of listening. Did he hear anything? Was the breathing of the four priests changing a little, – growing deeper, growing louder? There! and there again! was that a whisper of prayer, or was it – could it be – the faintest suspicion of a snore? He lay still; waited and listened, listened and waited. After a little while there could be no doubt about it, – the four men were breathing heavily, slowly, regularly; and one of them rolled out a sonorous, a majestic snore, which resounded through the heavy perfumed air of the Temple, yet caused no movement among the other three. There could be no doubt about it, – the priests were asleep!

Slowly, softly, the boy lifted his head; then he rose to his knees, and looked fearfully at the sleepers. There they lay, flat on their faces, their hands clasped over their heads. He touched one of them, – there was no answering movement. He shook another by the shoulders; he shook them all. They snored in concert, but gave no other sign of life. The drugged wine had done its work.

Then, and not till then, did Chop-Chin venture to lift his eyes and look upon the awful mystery which was hidden by these golden walls. He trembled, he turned white as the tunic which covered his dusky limbs; but standing erect, he gazed firmly at the Golden Dragon. From the floor rose a splendid altar of gold, studded thick with precious gems. Rubies, sapphires, and emeralds, set in mystic lines and figures, formed the characters which told the thirty-two names of the world-renowned dragon; and on the top of this glittering pedestal, fifteen feet in the air, stood the idol itself.

It was, indeed, a marvellous thing to look upon. Ten feet long, composed entirely of thin scales of the purest gold, laid over and over each other, and each scale tipped with a diamond. Two magnificent rubies glowed in the eye-sockets, and the head was surmounted by a crown of emeralds worth any ordinary kingdom. But the tail! the tail was the wonder of wonders. Millions of delicate gold wires as fine as silk waved gracefully from the scaly tip a length of three feet, and each one was tipped with a diamond, a ruby, or an emerald of surpassing beauty and lustre. So wonderful was the shimmering light of the stones that the whole tail seemed to sway and curl to and fro, as if some living creature were moving it, and rays of rainbow-colored light darted from it on every side, dazzling the eyes of the beholder.

Chop-Chin gazed and gazed, and hid his eyes and trembled, and gazed again. At last he shook himself together, and whispered, "My father! my father!" Then softly, surely, he began to climb up the golden altar. Stepping carefully from glittering point to point, holding on here by a projecting

ornament of carven amethyst, there by a block of jasper or onyx, he reached the top; then steadying himself, he leaned forward and lifted the Holy Dragon from its stand. To his amazement, instead of being barely able to move it, he found he could easily carry it, for the golden plates which formed it were so delicate that the weight of the whole great creature was incredibly small. Lightly the boy lifted it in his arms, and slowly, surely, noiselessly bore it to the ground. Here he paused, and looked keenly at the sleeping priests. Did that one's eyelids quiver; did his mouth twitch, as if he were waking from his sleep? Was that a movement of yon other man's arm, as if he were stealthily preparing to rise, to spring upon the sacrilegious robber? No! it was but the play of the colored light on the faces and raiment of the sleepers. The voice of their snoring still went up, calmly, evenly, regularly. The wine had done its work well.

Then Chop-Chin took off the sash which bound his tunic at the waist, and shook out its folds. It was a web of crimson silk, so fine and soft that it could be drawn through a finger-ring, and yet, when spread out, so ample that the boy found no difficulty in completely covering with it his formidable prize. Thus enwrapped, he bore the Golden Dragon swiftly from the Temple, closing the doors of gold softly behind him. He crossed the ivory and silver pavement of the inner court, and came to the ivory gate. It was closed, and beside it lay the four white-clad warriors, sunk in profound slumber. Stepping lightly over their prostrate forms, Chop-Chin opened the gate softly, and found himself in the second court. This, also, he traversed safely, finding the armed guardians of the steel gate also sleeping soundly, with their mouths wide open, and their shining spears pointing valiantly at nothing. A touch upon the glittering gate, – it opened, and Chop-Chin began to breathe more freely when he saw the bronze gates of the outer court-yard, and knew that in another minute, if all went well, he would be in the open street. But, alas! the four guards clad in black armor, who kept watch by the outer gate, had been the first to drink the drugged wine, and already the effect of the powerful narcotic which it contained had begun to wear off. As Chop-Chin, bearing in his arms the shrouded figure of the mighty idol, approached the gate, one of the four sleepers stirred, yawned, rubbed his eyes, and looked about him. It was quite dark, but his eye caught the faint glimmer of the boy's white robe, and seizing his pike, he exclaimed, —

"Who goes there?"

Chop-Chin instantly stepped to his side, and said in a low whisper, —

"It is I, Nai-Ping, second priest of the Saki-Pan, bound on business of the Temple. Let me pass, and quickly, for the chief priest waits my return."

The sentinel bowed low, and undid the fastenings of the huge bronze gates. They swung open silently, and the boy passed through with his awful burden.

"Strange!" soliloquized the guard, as he drew the massive bolts again. "I never knew one of the priests to go out at this time of night. But I dared not say anything, lest he should find out that I was asleep at my post. And now that he is gone," he added, "I may as well just take forty winks, as he may be away some time."

So saying, he curled himself up on the marble pavement, and fell this time into a natural slumber.

Ten o'clock of a dark night. The outer gates of the royal palace were closed, though lights still shone in many of the windows. Outside the gate a sentinel was pacing up and down, armed with pike and broadsword. Every time he turned on his beat, he looked up and down the narrow street to see if anything or anybody were approaching. Suddenly, as he wheeled about, he saw before him a figure which seemed to have sprung all in a moment out of the blackness of the night. It was the figure of a boy, carrying a burden considerably larger than himself, – a dark and shapeless mass, which yet seemed not to be heavy in proportion to its size.

"What is this?" cried the astonished sentinel. "Who art thou, and what monstrous burden is this thou carriest so lightly?"

"Hist!" said the boy, speaking in an awestruck whisper, "speak not so loud, friend! This is the Celestial Footstool!"

The sentinel recoiled, and stared in dismay at the dark bundle.

"May the Holy Dragon preserve me!" he said. "What has happened?"

"His Celestial Majesty," replied Chop-Chin, "threw it in anger at his Putter-on-of-Slippers yesterday, and broke one of its legs. All day my master, the Chief Cabinet-maker, has been at work on it, and now he has sent me with it by nightfall, that no profane eye may see clearly even the outer covering of the sacred object."

"Pass in," said the sentinel, opening the gate. "But tell me, knowest thou how it will fare with the Putter-on-of-Slippers? He is cousin to my stepfather's aunt by marriage, and I would not that aught of ill should befall so near a relative."

"Alas! I know not," said the boy, hastening forward. "I fear it may go hard with him."

The sentinel shook his head sadly, and resumed his walk; while Chop-Chin crept softly through the court-yard, keeping close to the wall, and feeling as he went along for a certain little door he knew of, which led by a staircase cut in the thickness of the wall to a certain unused closet, near the Celestial Bed-chamber.

While all this was going on, the Emperor of China, the great and mighty Wah-Song, was going to bed. He had sipped his night-draught of hot wine mingled with honey and spices, sitting on the edge of the Celestial Bed, with the Celestial Nightcap of cloth-of-silver tied comfortably under his chin, and the Celestial Dressing-gown wrapped around him. He had scolded the Chief Pillow-thumper because the pillows were not fat enough, and because there were only ten of them instead of twelve. He had boxed the ears of the Tyer-of-the-Strings-of-the-Nightcap, and had thrown his golden goblet at the Principal Pourer, who brought him the wine. And when all these things were done, his Celestial Majesty Wah-Song got into bed, and was tucked in by the Finishing Toucher, who got his nose well tweaked by way of thanks. Then the taper of perfumed wax was lighted, and the shade of alabaster put over it, and then the other lights were extinguished; and then the attendants all crawled out backwards on their hands and knees, and shut the door after them; and then His Celestial Majesty went to sleep.

Peacefully the Emperor slept, – one hour, two hours, three hours, – discoursing eloquently the while in the common language of mankind, – the language of the nose. At last he began to dream, – a dreadful dream. He was in the Golden Temple, praying before the Jewelled Shrine. He heard an awful voice, – the voice of the Golden Dragon. It called his name; it glared upon him with its ruby eyes; it lifted its crowned head, and stretched its long talons toward him. Ah! ah! The Emperor tried to scream, but he could make no sound. Once more the dreadful voice was heard: —

"Wah-Song! Wah-Song! Awake!"

The Emperor sprang up in bed, and looked about him with eyes wild with terror. Ah! what was that? – that glittering form standing at the foot of his bed; that crowned head raised high as if in anger; those glaring red eyes fixed menacingly upon him!

"Ah, horror! ah, destruction! the Golden Dragon is here!"

With one long howl of terror and anguish, His Celestial Majesty Wah-Song rolled off the bed and under it, in one single motion, and lay there flat on his face, with his hands clasped over his head. Quaking in every limb, his teeth chattering, and a cold sweat pouring from him, he listened as the awful voice spoke again.

"Wah-Song!" said the Golden Dragon, "thou hast summoned me, and I am here!"

The wretched Emperor moaned.

"I – I – I sum-summon thee, most Golden and Holy Dragon?" he stammered faintly. "May I be b-b-bastinadoed if I did!"

"Listen!" said the Dragon, sternly, "and venture not to speak save when I ask thee a question. Yesterday morning, in consequence of thine own caprice in going out unannounced, thy silly shoes and thy pusillanimous petticoat became wet. For this nothing, thou has condemned to death my faithful

servant Ly-Chee, who has brought me fresh melons every Tuesday afternoon for thirty years. When others, less inhuman than thou, interceded for his life, thou madest reply, 'We swear, that unless the Golden Dragon himself come down from his altar and beg for this man's life, he shall die!'"

The Emperor groaned, and clawed the carpet in his anguish.

"Therefore, Wah-Song," continued the Dragon, "I am here! I come not to beg, but to command. Dost thou hear me?"

"Ye-ye-yes!" murmured the wretched monarch. "I hear thee, Most Mighty. I – I – didn't know he brought thee melons. I brought thee two dozen pineapples myself, the other day," he added piteously.

"Thou didst!" exclaimed the Golden Dragon, fiercely. "Thou didst, *slave!* and they were half-rotten. Ha!" and he gave a little jump on the floor, making his glittering tail wave, and his flaming eyes glared yet more fiercely at the unfortunate Wah-Song, who clung yet more closely to the carpet, and drummed on it with his heels in an extremity of fear.

"Listen, now," said the Fiery Idol, "to my commands. Before day-break thou wilt send a free pardon to Ly-Chee, who now lies in the prison of the condemned, expecting to die at sunrise."

"I will! I will!" cried the Emperor.

"Moreover," continued the Dragon, "thou wilt send him, by a trusty messenger, twenty bags of goodly ducats, one for every hour that he has spent in prison."

The Emperor moaned feebly, for he loved his goodly ducats.

"Furthermore, thou wilt make Ly-Chee thy Chief Sweeper for life, with six brooms of gilded straw, with ivory handles, as his yearly perquisite, besides three dozen pairs of scrubbing-shoes; and his son, Chop-Chin, shalt thou appoint as Second Sweeper, to help his father."

The Emperor moaned again, but very faintly, for he dared not make any objection.

"These are my orders!" continued the Dragon. "Obey them strictly and speedily, and thine offence may be pardoned. Neglect them, even in the smallest particular, and – Ha! Hum! Wurra-wurra-g-r-r-r-r-r!" and here the Dragon opened his great red mouth, and uttered so fearful a growl that the miserable Emperor lost hold of such little wits as had remained to him, and fainted dead away.

Ten minutes later, the sentinel at the gate was amazed at the sight of the Chief Cabinet-maker's apprentice, reappearing suddenly before him, with his monstrous burden still in his arms. The boy's hair was dishevelled, and his face was very pale. In truth, it had been very hard work to get in and out of the hollow golden monster, and Chop-Chin was well-nigh exhausted by his efforts, and the great excitement which had nerved him to carry out his bold venture.

"How now!" cried the sentinel. "What means this, boy?"

"Alas!" said Chop-Chin, "alas! unhappy that I am! Was it my fault that the mended leg was a hair-breadth shorter than the others? Good soldier, I have been most grievously belabored, even with the Sacred Footstool itself, which, although it be a great honor, is nevertheless a painful one. And now must I take it back to my master, for it broke again the last time His Celestial Majesty brought it down on my head. Wherefore let me pass, good sentinel, for I can hardly stand for weariness."

"Pass on, poor lad!" said the good-natured soldier. "And yet – stay a moment! thinkest thou that aught would be amiss if I were to take just one peep at the Celestial Footstool? Often have I heard of its marvellous workmanship, and its tracery of pearl and ebony. Do but lift one corner of the mantle, good youth, and let me see at least a leg of the wonder."

"At thy peril, touch it not!" cried the boy, in great alarm. "Knowest thou not that the penalty is four hundred lashes? Not a single glance have I ventured to cast at it, for they say its color changes if any profane eye rest upon its polished surface."

"Pass on, then, in the name of the Dragon!" said the sentinel, opening the gate; and bidding him a hasty good-night, Chop-Chin hurried away into the darkness.

Now, while all this was going on, it chanced that the four priests of the First Order of the Saki-Pan awoke from their slumber. What their feelings were when they lifted their eyes and saw that the

Golden Dragon was gone, is beyond my power to tell. Their terror was so extreme that they did not dare to move, but after the first horrified glance at the bare altar flung themselves flat on their faces again, and howled and moaned in their anguish.

"We slept!" they cried, in a doleful chant of misery. "Yea, verily slept we.

"Ai! ai! we know not why;

Wow! wow! we know not how.

"Thou removedst thyself. Thou raisedst the paw of strength and the hind-feet of swiftness. Because we slept, thou hast gone away, and we are desolate, awaiting the speedily-advancing death.

"Hong! Kong! Punka-wunka-woggle!

Hong! Kong! Punka-wunka-wogg!"

While thus the wretched priests lay on the golden floor, bewailing their sin and its dreadful consequences, there fell suddenly on their ears a loud and heavy sound. It was at some distance, – a heavy clang, as of some one striking on metal. "Pong! pong!" what could it be? And now came other sounds, – the opening and shutting of gates, the tread of hasty feet, the sound of hurried voices, and finally a loud knocking at the door of the Temple itself.

"Open, most holy Priests of the Saki-Pan!" cried a voice. "We have strange and fearful news! Open without delay!"

The unhappy priests hurried to the door, and flung it open with trembling hands. Without stood all the guards of all the gates, the white and the steel-clad soldiers clustering about the four black-clad guardians of the outer gate.

"Speak!" said the chief priest in great agitation, "what is your errand?"

"O Priest!" said the black guards, trembling with excitement, "we heard a great knocking at the gate."

"Yes, yes!" cried the priest, "I know it. What more?"

"O Priest!" said the guards, "we were affrighted, so great was the noise; so we opened the gate but a little way, and peeped through; and we saw – we saw – " They paused, and gasped for breath.

"Speak, sons of pigs!" shrieked the priest, "*what* did you see?"

"We saw the Golden Dragon!" said the soldiers, in a fearful whisper. "He is sitting up – on his hind-legs – with his mouth open! and he knocked – he knocked – "

But the priests of the Saki-Pan waited to hear no more. Rushing through the court-yards, they flung wide open the great bronze gates. They caught up the Golden Dragon, they raised it high on their shoulders, and with shouts of rejoicing they bore it back to the Temple, while the guards prostrated themselves before it.

"He went out!" sang the priests. "He walked abroad, for the glory and welfare of his subjects. He cast upon the city the eye of beneficence; he waved over it the plenipotentiary tail!

"Ai! ai! we know not why!

Wow! wow! we know not how!

Glory to the Holy Dragon, and happiness and peace to the city and the people!"

But in the house of Ly-Chee all was sunshine and rejoicing. At daybreak a procession had come down the little street, – a troop of soldiers in the imperial uniform, with music sounding before them, and gay banners flaunting in the morning air. In the midst of the troop rode Ly-Chee, on a splendid black horse. He was dressed in a robe of crimson satin embroidered with gold, and round his neck hung strings of jewels most glorious to see. Behind him walked twenty slaves, each carrying a fat bag of golden ducats; and after the troop came more slaves, bearing gilded brooms with ivory handles and scrubbing-shoes of the finest quality. And all the soldiers and all the slaves cried aloud, continually: —

"Honor to Ly-Chee, the Chief-Sweeper of the court-yard! Honor and peace to him and all his house!"

The procession stopped before the little house, and the good sweeper, stupefied still with astonishment at his wonderful good fortune, dismounted and clasped his wife and children in his arms. And they wept together for joy, and the soldiers and the slaves and all the people wept with them.

But the Celestial Emperor, Wah-Song, lay in bed for two weeks, speaking to no man, and eating nothing but water-gruel. And when he arose, at the end of that time, behold! he was as meek as a six-years old child.

CHAPTER III

THE grandmother's story was received with great approbation, and the different members of the family commented on it, each after his fashion.

"I should like to have been Chop-Chin!" exclaimed Toto. "How exciting it must have been! Only think, Coon, of talking to the Emperor in that way, and scolding him as if he were a little boy."

"Well, I never saw an Emperor," said the raccoon; "but I certainly should not wish to talk to one, if they are all such wretched creatures as Wah-Song. I should like to have been the Finishing-Toucher; then if he had pulled *my* nose – hum! ha! we should see!"

"Dear Madam," said the bear, who had been staring meditatively into the fire, "there is one thing in the story that I do not understand; that is – well – you spoke of the boy's having a pig-tail."

"Yes, Bruin!" said the grandmother. "A Chinese pig-tail, you know."

"Yes, certainly," said Bruin. "A Chinese pig's tail it would naturally be. Now, I confess I do not see *how* a pig's tail could be worn on the head, or how it could be unbraided; that is, if the Chinese pigs have tails like that of our friend in the sty yonder."

Toto laughed aloud at this, and even the grandmother could not help smiling a very little; but she gently told Bruin what a Chinaman's pig-tail was, and how he wore it. Meantime, Miss Mary, the parrot, looked on with an air of dignified amusement.

"My respected father," she said presently, "spent some years in China. It is a fine country, though too far from Africa for my taste."

"Tell us about your father, Miss Mary!" exclaimed the squirrel. "Fine old bird he must have been, eh?"

"He was, indeed!" replied the parrot, with some emotion. "He was a noble bird. His beak, which I am said to have inherited, was the envy of every parrot in Central Africa. He could whistle in nine languages, and his tail – but as the famous poet Gabblio has sweetly sung, —

"All languages and tongues must fail,
In speaking of Polacko's tail."

"Polacko was my father's name," she explained. "He was universally respected. Ah, me!"

"But how came he to go to China?" asked Toto.

"He was captured, my dear, and taken there when very young. He lived there for twenty years, with one of the chief mandarins of the empire. He led a happy life, with a perch and ring of ebony and silver, the freedom of the house, and chow-chow four times a day. At last, however, the young grandson of the mandarin insisted upon my father's learning to eat with chopsticks. The lofty spirit of Polacko could not brook this outrage, and the door being left open one day he flew away and made his way to Africa, the home of his infancy, where he passed the rest of his life. I drop a tear," added Miss Mary, raising her claw gracefully to her eyes, "to his respected memory."

Nobody saw the tear, but all looked grave and sympathetic, and the good-natured bear said, "Quite right, I'm sure. Very proper, certainly!"

But now the grandmother rose and folded up her knitting.

"Dear friends, and Toto, boy," she said, "it is bed-time, now, for the clock has struck nine. Good-night, and pleasant dreams to you all. My good Bruin, you will cover the fire, and lock up the house?"

"Trust me for that, dear Madam!" said the bear, heartily.

"Come, then, Cracker," said the old lady. "Your basket is all ready for you, and it is high time you were in it." And with the squirrel perched on her shoulder she went into her own little room, closing the door behind her.

After exchanging mutual "good-nights," the other members of the family sought their respective sleeping-places. The birds flew to their perches, and each, tucking her head and one leg away in some mysterious manner, became suddenly a very queer looking creature indeed.

"Coon," said Toto, "come and sleep on my bed, won't you? My feet were cold, last night, and you do make such a delightful foot-warmer."

"Humph!" said the raccoon, doubtfully. "I don't know, Toto. It won't be as warm for *me* as my basket, though no doubt it would be nice for you."

"I'll put the big blue dressing-gown over you," said Toto. "You know you like that, because you can put your nose in the pocket, and keep it warm."

"All right," cried the raccoon. "Come along, then!" and off they went.

Bruin now proceeded to rake the ashes over the fire, covering it neatly and carefully. He filled the kettle; he drew the bolts of door and windows; and finally, when all was snug and safe, the good bear laid himself down on the hearth-rug, and soon was fast asleep.

Now all was quiet in the little cottage. Outside, the snow still fell, softly, steadily, silently. In the shed, Bridget, the cow, was sleeping soundly, with a cock and three hens roosting on her back, according to their invariable custom. In the warm, covered sty the pig also slept. He had no name, the pig; he would have scorned one.

"I am a pig," he was wont to say, "and as such every one knows me. There is no danger of my being mistaken for anything else." Which was very true.

But though slumber held fast, apparently, all the dwellers in cottage, shed, and sty, there were in reality two pairs of eyes which were particularly wide-awake at this moment. They were very black eyes, very bright eyes, and they were, if you wish to know, peeping into the kitchen through the crack under the cellar-door, to see what they could see.

"Nobody there!" said little brown Squeak.

"No, nobody there!" said little brown Scrabble.

"Hark! what was that noise?" cried Squeak.

"Only the wind!" said Scrabble.

"Do you think we can get through the crack?" said Squeak.

"Nothing like trying!" said Scrabble.

"Scrabble!" went little brown Squeak.

"Squeak!" went little brown Scrabble.

And the next moment they were in the kitchen.

It was nearly dark, but not quite, for the covered embers still sent out a dusky glow. It was warm; the floor was smooth and flat; there was a smell as if there might be something to eat, somewhere. Altogether, it was a very pleasant place for two little mice to play in; and as they had it all to themselves, why should they not play? Play they did, therefore, with right good-will; scampering hither and thither, rolling over and over each other, poking their little sharp noses into every crack and cranny they could find. Oh, what fun it was! How smooth the floor! how pleasant the dry, warm air, after their damp cellar-home!

But about that smell, now! where did it come from? Playing and romping is hungry work, and the two little brown mouse-stomachs are empty. It seems to come from under that cupboard door. The crack is wide enough to let out the smell, but not quite wide enough to let in Messrs. Scrabble and Squeak. If they could enlarge it a bit, now, with the sharp little tools which they always carry in their mouths! So said, so done! "Nibble! nibble! nibble! Gnaw! gnaw! gnaw!" It is very fatiguing work; but, see! the crack widens. If one made oneself *very* small, now? It is done, and the two mice find themselves in the immediate neighborhood of a large piece of squash pie. Oh, joy! oh, delight! too great for speech or squeak, but just right for attack. "Nibble! nibble! Gobble! gobble!" and soon the plate shines white and empty, with only the smell of the roses – I mean the pie – clinging round it still. There is nothing else to eat in the cupboard, is there? Yes! what is this paper package which

smells so divinely, sending a warm, spicy, pungent fragrance through the air? Ah! pie was good, but this will be better! Nibble through the paper quickly, and then – Alas! alas! the spicy fragrance means *ginger*, and it is not only warm, but *hot*. Oh, it burns! oh, it scorches! fire is in our mouths, in our noses, our throats, our little brown stomachs, now only too well filled. Water! water! or we die, and never see our cool, beloved cellar again. Hurry down from the shelf, creep through the crack, rush frantically round the kitchen. Surely there is a smell of water? Yes, yes! there it is, in that tin basin, yonder. Into it we go, splashing, dashing, drinking in the silver coolness, washing this fiery torment from our mouths and throats.

Thoroughly sobered by this adventure, the two little mice sat on the floor beside the basin, dripping and shivering, the water trickling from their long tails, their short ears, their sharp-pointed noses. They blinked sadly at each other with their bright black eyes.

"Shall we go home now, Scrabble?" said Squeak. "It is late, and Mother Mouse will be looking for us."

"I'm so c-c-c-cold!" shivered Scrabble, who a moment before had been devoured by burning heat. "Don't you think we might dry ourselves before that fire before we go down?"

"Yes!" replied Squeak, "we will. But – what is that great black thing in front of the fire?"

"A hill, of course!" said the other. "A black hill, I should say. Shall we climb over it, or go round it?"

"Oh, let us climb over it!" said Squeak. "The exercise will help to warm us; and it is such a queer-looking hill, I want to explore it."

So they began to climb up the vast black mass, which occupied the whole space in front of the fireplace.

"How soft the ground is! and it is warm, too!"

"Because it is near the fire, stupid!"

"And what is this tall black stuff that grows so thick all over it? It isn't a bit like grass, or trees either."

"It *is* grass, of course, stupid! what else could it be? Come on! come on! we are nearly at the top, now."

"Scrabble," said little brown Squeak, stopping short, "you may call me stupid as much as you please, but *I* don't like this place. I – I – I think it is moving."

"*Moving?*" said little brown Scrabble, in a tone of horror.

And then the two little mice clutched each other with their little paws, and wound their little tails round each other, and held on tight, tight, for the black mass *was* moving! There was a long, stretching, undulating movement, slow but strong; and then came a quick, violent, awful shake, which sent the two brothers slipping, sliding, tumbling headlong to the floor. Picking themselves up as well as they could, and casting one glance back at the black hill, they rushed shrieking and squeaking to the cellar-door, and literally flung themselves through the crack. For in that glance they had seen a vast red cavern, a yawning gulf of fire, open suddenly in the black mass, which was now heaving and shuddering all over. And from this fiery cavern came smoke and flame (at least so the mice said when they got home to the maternal hole), and an awful roaring sound, which shook the whole house and made the windows rattle.

"Home to our Mother Mouse! Home to our Mother Mouse! and never, never, will we leave our cellar again!"

But Bruin sat up on his haunches, and scratched himself and stretched himself, and gave another mighty yawn.

"Haw-wa-wow-you-wonk!" said the good bear. "Those must have been very lively fleas, to wake me out of a sound sleep. I wonder where they have crept to! I don't seem to feel them now. Ha! humph! Yaow! very sleepy! Not morning yet; take another nap."

And stretching his huge length once more along the floor, Bruin slept again.

CHAPTER IV

AT dinner the next day, it was noticed that Coon was very melancholy. He shook his head frequently, and sighed so deeply and sorrowfully that the kind heart of the wood-pigeon was moved to pity.

"Are you not well, my dear Coon?" she asked. "Something has gone amiss with you, evidently. Tell us what it is."

The raccoon shook his head again, and looked unutterably doleful.

"I knew how it would be, Coon," said the bear. "You shouldn't have eaten that third pie for supper. Two pies are enough for anybody, after such a quantity of bread and honey and milk as you had."

Coon sighed again, more deeply than before.

"I *didn't* eat it all," he said; "I only wish I had!"

"Why, Coon," queried Toto, "what's the trouble?"

"Well," said Coon, "there was a piece left. I couldn't eat any more, so I put it away in the cupboard, thinking I would have it for lunch to-day. It was a lovely piece. I never saw such a squash pie as that was, anyhow, and that piece – "

He paused, and seemed lost in the thought of the pie.

"*Well!*" exclaimed Toto. "So you *did* eat it for your lunch, and now you are unhappy because you didn't keep it for dinner. Is that it?"

"Not at all!" replied the other, "not at all! I trust I am not *greedy*, Toto, *whatever* my faults may be. I went to get it for my luncheon, for I had been working all the morning like a – "

"Dormouse!"

"Tree-toad!"

"Grasshopper!" murmured the squirrel, the bear, and Toto, simultaneously.

"Like a raccoon!" he continued severely. "I can say no more than that; and I was desperately hungry. I went to the cupboard to get my piece of pie, and it was – gone!"

"Gone!" exclaimed the grandmother; "why, who can have taken it?"

"That is the point, Madam!" said Coon. "It was some small creature, for it got in through the crack under the cupboard door, gnawing away the wood. I have examined the marks," he added, "and they are the marks of small, very sharp teeth." And he looked significantly at the squirrel.

"What do you mean by looking at me in that way?" demanded little Cracker, whisking his tail fiercely, and bristling all over. "I've a good mind to bite your ears with my sharp teeth. I never touched your old pie. If you say I did, I'll throw this cheese – "

"Cracker! Cracker!" said the grandmother, gently, "you forget yourself! Good manners at table, you know. I am sure," she added, as Cracker hung his head and looked much ashamed, "that none of us think seriously for a moment that you took the pie. Coon loves his joke; but he has a good heart, and he would not really give you pain, I know. Of course he did not mean anything. Am I not right, Coon?"

It is only justice to the raccoon to say that he was rather abashed at this. He rubbed his nose, and gave a deprecatory wink at Bruin, who was looking very serious; then, recovering himself, he beamed expansively on the squirrel, who still looked fierce, though respect for "Madam" kept him silent.

"Mean anything?" he cried. "Dear Madam, do I *ever* mean anything, – anything unkind, at least?" he added hastily, as Toto looked up with a suppressed chuckle. "I beg your pardon, Cracker, my boy, and I hope you won't bear malice. As for those marks – "

"Those marks," interrupted the bear, who had risen from his seat and was examining the cupboard door, "were made by mice. I am quite sure of it."

"So am I," said Miss Mary, quietly. "I saw them do it."

"What!"

"You!"

"When?"

"How?"

"Tell us!" exclaimed every one, in a breath.

"Two brown mice," said Miss Mary, "came out from under the cellar-door about midnight. They gnawed at the cupboard till they had made the crack wide enough to pass through. Then I heard them say, 'Squash pie!' and heard them nibbling, or rather gobbling. After a while they came rushing out as if the cat were after them, and jumped into the water-basin. Then they tried to climb up Bruin's back, but he yawned like an alligator, and shook them off, and they ran hurry-scurry under the cellar-door again."

A great laugh broke out at this recital of Messrs. Squeak and Scrabble's nocturnal adventure, and under cover of the laughter the raccoon approached the parrot.

"Why didn't you give the alarm," he asked, "or drive off the mice yourself? You knew it was my pie, for you saw me put it there."

Miss Mary cocked her bright yellow eye at him expressively.

"I lost two feathers from my tail, yesterday," she said. "Somebody bit them off while I was asleep. They were fine feathers, and I cannot replace them."

The two exchanged a long, deep look. At length —

"Miss Mary," said the raccoon aloud, "what was the color of your lamented husband? You told us once, but I am ashamed to say I'm not positive that I remember."

"Green!" replied Miss Mary, in some surprise, — "a remarkably fine emerald green. But why do you ask?"

"Ah, I thought so!" said the raccoon, ingenuously. "That explains his choice of a wife. — Walk, Toto, did you say? I am with you, my boy!" and in three bounds he was out of the door, and leaping and frolicking about in the new-fallen snow.

Toto caught up his cap and followed him, and the two together made their way out of the yard, and walked, ran, leaped, jumped, tumbled, scrambled, toward the forest. The sky had cleared, and the sun shone brilliantly on the fresh white world. On every hand lay the snow, — here heaped and piled in fantastic drifts and strange half-human shapes; there spread smooth, like a vast counterpane. The tall trees of the forest bent under white feathery masses, which came tumbling down on Toto and his companion, as they lightly pushed the branches aside and entered the woods.

A winter walk in the woods! It is always a good thing for any one who has eyes in his head, but it is especially good when you see all that Coon and Toto saw; when you know, from every tiny track or footmark, what little creatures have been running or hopping about; when many of these little creatures are your friends, and all of them at least acquaintances. How fresh and crisp the air was! how soft and powdery and generally delightful the snow! What a pleasant world it was, on the whole!

"Let me see!" said the raccoon, stopping and looking about him. "It is just about here that Chucky's aunt lives. Yes, I remember, now. You see that oak-stump yonder, with the moss on it? Well, her burrow is just under that. Suppose we give her a call, and tell her how her hopeful nephew is."

"Nonsense!" said Toto, "she is as fast asleep as he is, of course. We couldn't wake her if we tried, and why should we try?"

"Might have a game of ball with her," suggested the raccoon. "But I don't know that it's worth while, after all."

"Who lives in that hollow tree, now?" asked Toto. "The wild-cat used to live there, you know. It is a very comfortable tree, if I remember right."

"You found it so once, didn't you, Toto?" said Coon. "Do you remember that day, when a thunder-shower came up, and you crept into that hollow tree for shelter? Ha! ha! ha! *do* you remember that day, my boy?"

"I should think I did remember it!" cried Toto. "I am not likely to forget it. It was raining guns and pitchforks, and the lightning was cracking and zigzagging all through the forest, it seemed, and the thunder crashing and bellowing and roaring – "

"Like Bruin, when the bumble-bee stung his nose!" put in the raccoon.

"Exactly!" said Toto. "There I was, curled up well in the hollow, thinking how lucky I was, when suddenly came two green eyes glowering at me, and a great spitting and spluttering and meowling.

"Get out of my house!" said the creature. 'F-s-s-s-s-yeh-yow-s-s-s-s-s! get out of my house, I say!'

"My dear Madam,' I said, 'it is really more than you can expect. You are already thoroughly wet, and if you come here you will only drip all over the nice dry hole and spoil it. Now, *I* am quite dry; and to tell you the truth, I mean to remain so.'

"Oh, how angry that cat was!

"My name is Klawtobitz!' she cried. 'I have lived in this tree for seven years, and I am not going to be turned out of it by a thing with two legs and no tail. Who are you, I say?'

"I am a boy!' cried I, getting angry in my turn. 'I wouldn't have a tail if I was paid for it; and I will *not* leave this hole!'

"And then the old cat humped her back, and grinned till I saw every tooth in her head, and came flying at me, – claws spread, and tail as big round as my arm. There we fought, tooth and nail, fist and claw, till we were both out of breath. Finally I got her by the throat, and she made her teeth meet in my arm, and there we both were. I had heard no noise save the cat's screeching in my ear; but now, suddenly, a great growly voice, close beside us, cried, —

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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