

The PLOT AGAINST SANTA

by Lucrece Hudgins

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Chapter 1

KING UTTAR MEETS MISHA THE GHOUL

Once, long ago, in the land of Aradoone, there lived a wicked King. His name was King Uttar and everyone in the realm hated and feared him.

Now Uttar had an elder brother named Charles who was the rightful King of Aradoone, but Uttar locked Charles deep in a dungeon and told the people he himself was king because Charles was dead.

He was really so wicked that you can't imagine some of the things he did. He had been king only a year and a half and in that time he had stolen enough money from the people to build himself a huge castle high on a cliff and guarded it with hundreds of soldiers.

Some said the castle was filled with witches and demons and horrible ghouls but no one had really seen them.

Uttar took the best corn and potatoes and cabbages the people grew on their farms and he took their fattest cows and their strongest horses and their most succulent pigs. Really, he left the poor people scarcely anything at all for themselves!



"GET OUT!" SCREAMED THE KING.

Everyone had to work night and day to get the money to pay Uttar's taxes. Even the smallest children dug in the gardens or wove straw baskets or made chocolate fudge to sell in the market place.

All the same, once a year, every miserable heart was filled with gladness. That was at Christmas when folks gathered to sing and dance before the fire and feast on peanut brittle candy and butterscotch buns and delicious four layer chocolate cake that they made especially for this happy time.

And on Christmas Eve Santa Claus himself whirled out of the sky in his sled drawn by eight fine reindeer. He always left something for every child in the land - a drum or a yellow haired doll or a spinning top - some little thing that would help make up for all the unhappiness King Uttar brought to the land.

King Uttar hated Christmas more than any other time of the year, "It's just a lot of poppycock," he said over and over. "All the people playing games and hanging up stockings when they should be working."

But no matter how much he talked, Christmas and Santa Claus still came.

Now it happened one year, shortly before Christmas, that King Uttar was pacing up and down his long dining hall and wishing with all his might that he could do away with this Christmas business.

"What, wouldn't I give," he said aloud, "If I could keep Santa Claus from coming to Aradoone again!" At this very moment a croaky voice snorted, "Well, what would you give?"

King Uttar looked around in amazement. He had been alone in the room but now sitting in his own chair at the table, nibbling on a leg from the King's own pheasant, was the ugliest creature ever seen.

"W-w-who are you?" stammered the king.

"Ha!" scoffed the creature. "I am Misha the Ghoul."

"Get out!" screamed the king, remembering suddenly that he was the master of the castle.

The ghoul only grinned and kept right on chewing on the pheasant leg. "I've been here as long as you," he drawled. "And I'll be here five hundred years after you are dead. Me

and all my brothers and sisters, too. Besides, I know how to keep Santa from coming to Aradoone.”

King Uttar sat down beside the ghoul. “How?” he asked eagerly.

“Well,” said Misha “If Santa has no sled and no reindeer he couldn’t come could he?”

Uttar shook his head “But how could I get his sled and reindeer from him?” he asked.

“Leave that to me,” said Misha. “If I get them will you give me what I want?”

The King hesitated. He didn’t want to give away his whole kingdom. “What would it be?” he asked.

“I want a soft furry animal for a pet,” said Misha wistfully.

The King almost laughed with relief. “Certainly you shall have a soft furry pet for a reward,” he cried.

Misha the Ghoul climbed down from his chair, licked the pheasant gravy from his fingers and chuckled. “I shall have the sled and reindeer here tonight and there will be no more Christmas in Aradoone.”

And with these words he ducked under the table and vanished.

Chapter 2

THE SLED IS STOLEN

Christmas was only a few weeks away and the fairies and elves in Santa Land worked each day from sun up until long after the moon rose up over the snow covered mountains.

Mrs. Claus scurried from shop to shop seeing to it that all the doll dresses were just the fashionable length and that the wool on the teddy bears was brushed until it glistened.

Santa himself sat at his desk and studied over stacks of lists that all the boys and girls in the world had sent him.

"I declare," he mused. "It seems as if everyone wants skates this year. I don't have nearly enough. I'll have to get Patrick Tweedleknees to work on 'em. He can turn out roller skates as fast as Mrs. Claus can turn our buckwheat cakes for breakfast."

He read a few more letters and checked them off on his lists. Then he smiled as he read a letter from a little girl. "Ha!" he said softly. "This little girl says she wants nothing at all for Christmas except a baby brother. Well! I shall speak to Sandra the Queen Fairy. Perhaps she can arrange things."

He shoved all the letters to the back of his desk and putting on his big red muffler he went out in the snow. He stopped for a minute to watch a group of elves who were trying out some new kites. The wind was blowing so hard that they were having quite a time of it.

"They need longer tails," said Santa, and taking his handkerchief out of his pocket he tore it into strips and tied the strips to the tail of one of the kites. He was just getting it to fly high above the mountains when Mrs. Claus came running up to him.

"There's a mountain of work to be done." She said reprovingly. "And here you stand flying kites all day."

"Now, my dear, I was just seeing that they were done right," chuckled Santa. He put his arm around Mrs. Claus' waist and said, "Mrs. Claus, I am very hungry."

"Hungry!" cried Mrs. Claus. "Why you've just finished a lunch of baked potatoes, applesauce, turnips, asparagus, and blueberry pie! How can you be hungry!"

"I don't know," said Santa. "But there's a little place left empty and it would certainly be nice to fill it with one of those lemon tarts I saw you baking this morning."

"Oh, you!" said Mrs. Claus. But she smiled with pleasure and went back to the house to get the lemon tarts ready. Santa hunted up Patrick Tweedleknees to tell him about the roller skates.

"I'm doing all I can do right now," said Patrick gruffly. I haven't time to go making more roller skates."

He was the oldest dwarf in Santa Land and sometimes he was very bad tempered but actually he never meant any of the gruff things he said and Santa knew it.

"Another thing," said Santa, "I wish you'd go down to the stables and give my sled a paint job. It hasn't been painted since Christmas before last and it needs it very badly."

"that I'll do with pleasure," said Patrick for he really loved going down to the stables where Santa's eight reindeer were kept.

Santa returned to his cozy little house and was just about to take one of Mrs. Claus' lemon tarts when the door flew open and Patrick Tweedleknees bounded into the room.

"They're gone!" he gasped and his eyes were fairly popping out of his head.

"What's gone?" said Santa. "Speak up!"

"The sled! And the reindeer! Everything!"

Santa leaped to his feet and upset the plate of lemon tarts. He ran out to the stables without even bothering with his red muffler. All the elves and dwarfs who had heard the news ran along behind him.

What Patrick had said was true. The stables were completely empty. All the little workers cluttered together and trembled with fear.

"It's the Ghouls of Aradoone who have done this job," said Santa sadly. "And unless I can get back my reindeer and sled before Christmas I shall never be able to visit the earth again."



"THEY'RE GONE!" HE GASPED.

Chapter 3

THE FOREST OF GHOULS

Santa and Mrs. Claus went into their little cottage and as soon as the door closed behind them Mrs. Claus burst into tears.

“It was such a mean thing for those ghouls to do,” she sobbed. “Why ever would they have wanted to harm us?”

But Santa said nothing. He sat rocking before the fire and when Mrs. Claus peeped at him she saw he had on his thinking cap. This was a funny little skull cap - black with a red tassel - which Santa wore when he wanted to think very hard.

Mrs. Claus stopped crying and went out to the kitchen to make some hot chocolate. “This will help him to think even better,” she said to herself.

Meanwhile, out by the stables, a strange thing was happening. The Santa Land Brownies had run into the woods and brought back four wild reindeer.

“We will teach these to fly,” they cried. “How pleased Santa will be when he sees!”

All the fairies and elves cheered up immensely as they set about teaching the four strange reindeer to fly. But, try as they would, the poor creatures could do no more than give a few clumsy leaps into the air and then fall back to the earth.

At last the fairies gave it up. “It’s all quite useless,” they said unhappily. “No reindeer in the world can fly except Santa’s very own.”

While all of this was happening, Misha, the Ghoul, stood at the reins in Santa’s sled and drove Santa’s reindeer furiously through the night skies.

When he was only halfway to King Uttar’s castle, he suddenly circled the reindeer twice in the sky and then slid down to the earth in a great black forest. This was the Forest of Ghouls and Misha had stopped for a visit before turning over his prize to the King.

Hardly had the sled landed, when crowds of ugly little demons, scary faced goblins and crooked-legged ghouls began popping out of trees and from under rocks and from behind bushes. They scrambled over the sled and climbed atop the reindeer squealing with delight.

“Where did you get it, Misha?” asked one fat ghoul who was called Ducky Ghoul because he waddled about on such stout legs.

“It belongs to Santa Claus,” said Misha. “I stole it this very night. I simply went to Santa’s stable and hitched up the sled and was off before those silly fairies and brownies had even seen me!”

All the little creatures stopped their scrambling about when they heard the news. They stared at Misha in disbelief and finally Ducky Ghoul said, “But Santa is our friend! Why did you steal his sled?”

And the ugly little demons around the sled cried, “Take it back! Take it back to Santa!”

But Misha only laughed. “Not I,” he said. “I am going to trade it for a soft furry animal for a pet.”

The forest folk were very angry. “Santa has always been very good to us,” said Ducky Ghoul, his fat cheeks quivering with rage. “You do wrong to harm him.”

“Yes,” said another ghoul. “Not a Christmas passes that Santa doesn’t bring even us forest folk something. Last year he brought us a raisin pie six feet deep and fifteen feet around. Now he won’t be able to bring us anything!”

“Perhaps not,” replied Misha unfeelingly. “But I must be on my way.”

And with the pull of the reins, he caused the reindeer to leave the ground and carry the sled into the sky. All the folk in the forest screamed with anger, but there was nothing they could do.

Misha was already out of sight high in the clouds.



THE POOR CREATURES COULD NOT FLY.

Chapter 4

KING UTTAR CELEBRATES

Down in Aradoone King Uttar was giving a great feast in his castle. Long lines of servants passed through the halls carrying huge platters of roast pig, steaming pots of turtle soup, and bowls of honey dew melons.

There was a different orchestra in each of four rooms and every nobleman in the land was there dancing with his lady. King Uttar strutted around, his evil eyes gleaming with pleasure. Never once did he think of his poor brother Charles whom he had thrown into prison so that he himself might be king.

It was after supper when all the guests were dazed with food and drink that he called them into the Great Hall and told the big news.

What news! Could it possibly be true? No! No! Dreadful! The King was only joking. Not even he could have done such a thing!

Their disbelief showed in their faces and King Uttar was angered. "It is true!" he shouted. "I have Santa's sled and reindeer locked in my stables! There will be no Christmas in Aradoone this year or ever again."

The guests shivered with fear. They dared not show their true feelings or the King would have thrown them into prison.

"I am the most powerful man in all the world!" roared the King. "There is nothing I cannot do!"

And just to prove it, he called for pen and paper and wrote an order that henceforth all the men, women and children of Aradoone would work for him. Whether they were miners or merchants or beggars, four-fifths of all the money they earned was to go to the King!

"I shall build a thousand ships," declared the King. "And I will conquer the whole world."

The guests trembled but they had to applaud. Then someone said, "Take us to see the reindeer!"

This delighted the King. He called for servants with lighted torches and everyone put on coats and hats and followed the King from the hail. They passed down three long winding corridors until they came to the great iron door leading to the castle yard.

The guards pushed open the door and the people thronged into the courtyard. As they approached the stables they heard a strange sound, it was the stamping of many heavy feet and above the stamping could be heard a terrible neighing as though some animal were deep in pain.

When the stable doors were unlocked they saw that the noise was made by Santa's eight reindeer who were huddled together in a dark corner. Each animal carried a chain around one leg which hound him to the wall so that he could not move or even lie down very comfortably

The King and all his guests gazed at the reindeer and the poor frightened animals gazed back through terrified eyes.



"THERE WILL BE NO CHRISTMAS IN ARADOONE THIS YEAR."

"See!" cried King Uttar exultantly. "They don't know what to make of it!"

But the guests could not bear to look any longer at the suffering animals. They turned away and asked to see Santa's sled. Uttar led them to another part of the stable where Santa's big red sled was chained to the floor. It had been banged around so much by the ghouls that its paint was badly scratched and one of the runners was bent.

It made the guests feel very badly seeing it there and they turned and went out of the stables and hurried back to the castle's gay halls. But as King Uttar was leaving, a little creature popped up beside him and the King saw that it was Misha the Ghoul.

"What are you going to do with the reindeer?" asked Misha.

"Oh," said the King, "I shall probably cut them up and have reindeer steak on Christmas Eve"

"I hope you give some to your poor brother Charles whom you've locked up in your dungeon," said Misha wickedly.

The King turned on him fearfully. "You won't tell anyone about that, will you?" he begged.

"No," said Misha. "That is not my business at all. I am much more interested in my reward. I shall come for it on Christmas Eve."

"I must say you've asked for a strange reward," mused Uttar. "A soft furry pet is nothing at all."

"We shall see!" chortled Misha and with a shriek of laughter he darted away under the stable.

Chapter 5

SANTA MAKES THREE MAGIC GIFTS

Santa Land was a very sad place. The goblins and fairies went about with long faces, and the elves - who are very timid folk, you know - spent whole days weeping into their silk handkerchiefs.

“What’s to become of us?” they asked one another. “Unless Santa gets back his sled and reindeer there’ll be no Christmas. There’ll be no need to make toys anymore and what in the world will we do with all the toys we’ve already made?”

“What I want to know,” said Timothy Dwarf who had just arrived in Santa Land, “Why can’t Santa get some new reindeer and a new sled. There’s time enough before Christmas.”

“We tried that!” replied the other folk. “Those eight reindeer are the only ones in all the world that can fly through the air. They can take Santa to every home on the earth on Christmas eve and have him back here for coffee and doughnuts on Christmas morning. Without them it would take a hundred years for Santa to take toys to every boy and girl who is waiting for them.”

At that moment a blue and silver winged fairy poked her head around the door and said, “Santa wants to talk to Patrick Tweedleknives.”

Patrick got up from his bench and went out of the shop. All the other workers ran to the window and watched the old dwarf as he hobbled over to Santa’s little cottage.

When Patrick knocked on Santa’s door, Mrs. Claus let him in and took him into the small private workroom where Santa was sitting in his rocker before the fire. With him were Sandra the Queen fairy and Dewey, the whistle making brownie.

“Come in, Patrick,” said Santa. “Mrs. Claus is about to serve us hot chocolate after which I have some things to show you.”

“Humph!” said Patrick grumpily, “I can’t say you seem very worried. What’s to become of us if there’s to be no more Christmas?”

“I declare, Patrick Tweedleknives,” reproved Mrs. Claus as she poured the dwarf a big cup of hot chocolate and dropped in a round blob of whip cream. “You get grumpier every day. Now don’t you worry - Santa’s going to get his reindeer back some way or another,”

“That is what I hope,” agreed Santa, putting down his cup which he had emptied in two swallows. “Now, I sat up all last night making three special gifts which I want you folk to give away for me”

“Let’s see the gifts,” said Patrick, showing some interest, for he knew that no one could make toys the way Santa could.

“Who shall we give them to?” asked Sandra.

“Why are they special?” asked Dewey.

“Not so many questions,” laughed Santa. “Here are the toys,” and he held them out on his outstretched hand for all to see.

There were three very small objects. One was a snow white horse carved out of ivory. It was only three inches long but was perfectly shaped with long flowing mane and muscles that seemed to bulge and ripple under the ivory skin.

The second object was a tiny gold key.

The third object was a small sword - no longer than your hand. The handle was exquisitely carved with the figures of heroes. The steel blade was sharp and true.

“Well,” gasped Patrick, letting out a whistle of admiration. “I must say they are as fine a toys as I have ever seen”

“What shall we do with them?” asked Dewey.

Santa gave the ivory horse to Patrick Tweedleknives. “You, Patrick,” he said, “Must give this to the strongest boy you can find.”

Then Santa gave the gold key to Sandra the Queen Fairy. “You, Sandra, must give this to the kindest boy you can find.”

And then Santa gave the tiny sword to Dewey. “You, Dewey, must give this to the bravest boy you can find.”

Then Santa stood up and said, “When each of you have given away your gift, perhaps somehow we will get back our precious reindeer in time for Christmas at Aradoone.”



“SANTA WANTS TO TALK TO PATRICK TWEEDLEKNIVES.”

Chapter 6

SANTA'S WORKERS COME TO EARTH

Patrick Tweedleknees and Sandra the Queen Fairy and Dewey, the whistle making brownie, took the three precious toys Santa had given them and went out in the empty stables to think.

Patrick held the little ivory horse in his hands and grumbled to himself "How shall I find the strongest boy in the world?" he said aloud. "Must I go around feeling the muscles of every child I see?"

Sandra and Dewey laughed.

Sandra said, "Being strong doesn't always mean having big muscles."

"I'd like to know what else it means," snapped Patrick.

"Well," Sandra tried to explain, "It might mean will power - like if a boy was strong enough to do without something he wanted or needed."

"Or," chimed in Dewey, "It might mean endurance - like if a boy kept on doing a job when he was so tired all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep for a hundred years."

"Well, my goodness," cried Patrick, "Why doesn't Santa tell me exactly what he means?"

"Because," said Sandra, "He knows perfectly well that you will recognize the strongest boy when you see him."

"We better start figuring how we're going to get down to earth," interrupted Dewey at this point. "It isn't as if we could go down in Santa's dear old sled!"

"Don't worry," said Patrick "I've been going down to earth on errands for Santa for about seven hundred years now and if I can't find an easy way down then I'm a purple haired goon."

With that Patrick bit off a piece of licorice which he always carried in his pocket to chew on when he had a job to do. Then, hitching up his trousers, he knelt down and began digging with his hard old fingers in the ground outside the stable. His finger nails were like little shovels and in a very few minutes he had dug a small round hole.

Sandra and Dewey looked through the hole, and on the other side far, far below, they saw the earth. And arched high over the earth, reaching almost to Santa Land itself, was a great blue and yellow and purple rainbow!

"There!" said Patrick. "The rainbow will be my bamboo slide to the earth!"

And he slipped through the hole and landed right on top of the rainbow. In another second he was sliding down the rainbow straight to the earth!

Dewey and Sandra watched through the hole until Patrick was out of sight. Then Dewey cried, "The rainbow is fading away! I shall have to find some other way to go down"

"Be careful of the magic sword," said Sandra, helping Dewey to fasten the little sword away in his coat pocket.

"Is it really magic do you think?" asked Dewey.

"Why, it must be," Replied Sandra firmly. "All of Santa's gifts are magic. They will be very lucky children who get these three gifts."

"I do hope Santa is right in saying they will help us to get back his reindeer and sled. What shall we do, Sandra, if we do not have Christmas anymore?"

"We must see to it that we do have Christmas," said Sandra. "Hurry now, Dewey, there is so little time."

"I am going," replied Dewey. And with a farewell wave he, too, dropped through the hole Patrick had dug. But he held on to the edge of the ground until a small white cloud came sailing by.



HE DOVE - PLOP! - RIGHT INTO THE CLOUD.

Then Dewey let go and fell headlong through the sky until he dove - plop! - right into the cloud. It was like landing in a big bowl of whipped cream and Dewey was covered with cloud from head to toe. But he wiped it out of his eyes and then hung over the side until he saw another cloud below him.

Holding his breath he dove for the second cloud. And when he had landed he jumped into still another which was even closer to the earth. And so he went from cloud to cloud until at last he landed in a snow drift on the highest mountain on the face of the earth.

Then Sandra too dropped through the hole in Santa Land. But she didn't have to slide down rainbows or dive into clouds to get to earth. Instead she spread her own beautiful blue and golden wings and with the little key tight in her hand flew gracefully towards the far off earth.

A LITTLE BOY'S JOURNEY

Meantime, the dreadful news about Santa's sled and reindeer had spread through Aradoone and there was a terrible sadness in every home.

Little children who had been counting on their fingers and toes the days until Christmas now wept and clung to their parents' hands.

"Do something, oh, please do something to save Santa's reindeer," they begged.

But fathers and mothers alike could only shake their heads. "What can we do?" they asked one another. "We cannot get into the King's Castle, and even if we could we would be thrown into prison."

"Does it mean there will be no Christmas at all?" asked the children.

"We will see," soothed the old folks. But their hearts were heavy for they knew that unless Santa's reindeer were saved there would be no Christmas ever again. "If only the good King Charles were still alive," they thought miserably. "Everyone was happy until Uttar came to the throne."

Now, in one far corner of Aradoone there lived a fair haired boy named Peter Swift. He had seven brothers and seven sisters and when they heard the news they were filled with grief.

Their father worked in the King's coal mines and their mother had been dead for many years. The fifteen children worked all day long in their home weaving straw baskets to trade in the market place for bread and corn.

For weeks the children had been planning their Christmas party. Although they worked from breakfast time until long after supper, the girls had stayed up past bedtime stringing cranberries together and making silver stars out of cardboard



EVERYONE HELD HIS BREATH.

to hang on their Christmas tree. The older boys got up early in the morning to carve little boats and toy dogs and elephants for the younger children.

"Now there will be no Christmas at all," sobbed little Mary Swift and she could hardly see the straw she was weaving because of the tears.

"And they say," whispered young Thomas Swift, "That we're not to be allowed to play anymore. Even on Sundays. We must work all the time for the King!"

The smaller children burst into tears and Alfred, the eldest boy, jumped to his feet.

"Not even the wicked King Uttar can destroy Christmas," he declared. "We must do something to save Santa's reindeer and sled."

"But, what can we do?" said Carol.

"I know not," replied Alfred. "But, one of us must go to the King's Castle and see what can be done. I am the oldest so I shall go."

"No! no!" cried all his brothers at once.

"I am the swiftest runner," argued Robin, "I can get there the fastest. I shall go."

"I am the tallest," asserted Edward. "I can climb the castle gates. I shall go."

"I am the youngest," blurted Thomas, "You will miss me the least. I shall go."

And so on. Each brother had some special reason why he should be the one to go. Finally they agreed to draw lots. Each lad wrote his name on a slip of paper and dropped the slip into the empty tea pot.

The smallest sister shook up the pot and Charlotte, the eldest girl, drew out a slip.

Everyone held his breath as Charlotte unfolded the slip and read it. Then she looked at the frailest and quietest child in the group.

"Peter," she murmured sadly, "It is you."

Peter's blue eyes brightened and the color came into his pale cheeks. Without a word he began fastening his thin little coat high around his throat.

"You will want food," said Charlotte quietly. She ran to the cupboard and wrapping up some crusts of black bread she slipped them into Peter's pocket.

"Here are my wool mittens," offered Edward. "They are warmer than yours."

"Take my cap," said Alfred. "It's the best in the family."

Peter took the cap and mittens gratefully. "Do not worry," he said as he opened the door. "I will find a way, never fear."

As he trudged off neither he nor his brothers and sisters, standing in the windows, saw the little old man who climbed down off the gate and followed Peter down the road.

Chapter 8

PATRICK GIVES AWAY THE IVORY HORSE

It was bitter cold and Peter was glad he had his brothers' cap and mittens. He walked all the afternoon across fields and through thick forests where there were trees seventeen times taller than he.

But at last he became tired and hungry so he sat down on a log beside the road and opened the little package of bread crusts which his sister had fixed for him. He was just preparing to eat when he saw a little old man coming down the path.

"Good evening, grandfather," he said politely as the old man came up beside him. "I hope you are near your home for the day is drawing to a close and it is bitter cold."

"Good evening, yourself," replied the old man. "Indeed it is cold and I am famished for it is three days since I have eaten."

With that the old man crumpled up right on the path. Peter ran to his side and cradled the old man's head in his arms. "What is it?" he cried. "Are you ill?"

"Food!" gasped the old man. "I must have food."

Although he had no idea how he was to get more food for himself, Peter emptied his package of bread crusts into the old man's hand. The old fellow was so hungry he gobbled them up before the boy had a chance to catch his breath.

"That was very fine," said the old man, and he got up and continued walking up the road without so much as a "thank you" to Peter.

"Well!" said Peter in surprise. And then he smiled. Perhaps he didn't know it was all the food he had.

He started to continue with his journey but he stopped at once. "I shall sleep here this night," he told himself, "For I am too weary to go further."

But it was too cold to sleep much and the boy was up before the dawn and trudging down the road. When it was light enough to see he stopped and picked berries from some tangled vines that lined the path. They were good berries and tasted wonderful to the hungry little boy. He filled his pockets

and started off but as he did so he heard a low moaning sound from beneath the bushes. Bending over he saw the old man curled up under one of the vines.

"What is it?" cried Peter in alarm and then he saw for himself. The old man was nearly frozen to death. He has tried to sleep under the vines but he had neither cap nor mittens and his ears and hands were blue with cold.

"Take mine," said Peter quickly. "I am younger than you and can better stand the cold." He took off his mittens and cap and gave them to the old man.

The fellow put them on and was warmer right away. He nodded curtly to the boy and was off at once on his way.

"What a strange old man," thought Peter, trying to warm his hands in his pockets. "Well, perhaps he just forgets to thank me. He is very old."

All morning he walked and in the afternoon he came upon the old man again. This time the fellow was sitting by the side of the road. "I am too weary to go further," he told Peter sadly.

"Climb on my back," said the boy, for, after all, he couldn't leave the old man there to die. "I will carry you to the nearest house."

So the man climbed on the boy's back. The lad was frail and the old man's weight seemed to grow heavier with every passing yard. Finally, long after the moon had risen, they reached a tiny cottage snuggling in a clump of pines.

"Here we are," said Peter, putting the old man down. "Perhaps we can spend the night here."

"Not I!" said the man. "I must be on my way for now my job is done. You have gone without food and clothing and carried a monstrous load."

Then Peter saw that the old man was holding out something in the palm of his hand. Peter took it and saw that it was an exquisitely carved ivory horse - a tiny thing only three inches long.

"It's beautiful," cried Peter admiringly. But when he looked up the old man had vanished completely.

Of course the old man was Patrick Tweedleknees and the ivory horse was the very one Santa Claus had told him to give to the strongest boy he could find.



THE OLD MAN'S WEIGHT SEEMED TO GROW.

Chapter 9

SANDRA GIVES AWAY THE GOLD KEY

When Peter was sure the strange little man had really disappeared he put the ivory horse in his pocket and knocked on the door of the little cottage. There was no answer but the boy was sure he heard a sound from within.

He walked around to a window and peeped in but could see nothing except the flickering flame of a tiny candle. Returning to the front door he put all his weight against it meaning to break it down. To his surprise it flew open at once. It hadn't even been locked! Now he heard another sound - it was that of a woman moaning.

He made his way on tiptoe towards the tiny light and there, lying on a bed of straw on the floor, was a woman and, by her side, was a tiny baby. The woman was overjoyed to see Peter for she was very ill.

The boy found two more candles on a table and these he lighted so that he could see better what he was about. He smashed up a cupboard and built a glowing fire in the fire place so that in a very short while the room was warm. He boiled some water over the fire and soaking a rag in the water gave it to the baby to suck.

He gave the sick woman some water, too, and when she was feeling better she reached out and held his hand.

"Don't leave us, I beg of you," she implored Peter, "My husband did something to displease the King and he was taken away by the soldiers three days ago. My baby and I will surely die if you leave us."

Peter patted her hand. "We shall see," he said.

Later when the mother and babe had fallen asleep Peter was filled with fear. "What shall I do?" he asked himself. "If I go they will die. But if I stay - even for a little while - I shall never get to the castle in time to save Santa's reindeer."

Finally he fell asleep and while he slept he had a dream. He dreamed that he went to Santa Claus himself and said "What shall I do?" And Santa said, "Peter, take first things first."

So, in the morning, Peter, remembering his dream, said "This woman and her babe are first." And he went to the woman and pressed her hand, "Never fear," he whispered. I shall stay with you until you are strong again."

And he stayed four days and four nights in the little cottage. He chopped down trees and broke up enough firewood to last a little family through the winter. He roamed the woods, gathering berries and herbs and sweet leaves, and all of these he stored in the pantry.

He built a cradle for the baby and made a new cupboard to take the place of the one he had burned. He drew great tubs of water from the well and scrubbed the floors of the cottage until they glistened. He patched a hole in the roof with bark torn from a birch tree.

On the fourth morning the woman rose from her bed. She herself prepared the porridge for that morning's breakfast. She swept the floor and bathed the baby.

"You are well now," said Peter happily, "And I must be on my way."

"Yes," said the woman. "But, first I want to give you this." And she pulled from the baby's dress a golden key.

Peter didn't want to take it but she made him. He put it in his pocket with the ivory horse and said farewell. He left the little house and walked down the road. When he came to the turn he looked back to wave but to his amazement the cottage had disappeared!

The trees are hiding it, of course, thought Peter.

But you and I know it wasn't the trees at all. The sick woman had been Sandra the Fairy and the golden key she gave to Peter was the very one Santa had told her to give to the kindest boy she could find.



SHE MADE HIM TAKE THE KEY.

Chapter 10

PETER HUNTS FOR A PURSE

Little Peter was still a long way from the King's castle and he dared not think what would happen if he failed to get there in time to save Santa's reindeer before Christmas.

But that morning he met with still a third interruption. He was coming towards a small village when he came to a rough place in the road. It was so treacherous that he tried to skirt it by walking far to one side.

Suddenly he lost his footing in the slippery snow and went tumbling down into a deep ditch. Jumping up he started to climb out but as he did so he stumbled over the form of a small boy who was lying there in a twisted heap.

At first Peter thought the lad was dead but then he saw that the little chest rose and fell in hard breathing. Taking him under the arms Peter managed to drag the unconscious boy out of the ditch and up to the road. He rubbed snow on the boy's face but it did no good. Finally he lifted him in his arms and carried him to a nearby barn. There in the warm hay the lad regained consciousness.

"What happened?" asked Peter.



"WHAT HAPPENED?" ASKED PETER.

"I do not know," replied the boy. "I was playing by the side of the road and I slipped into the ditch. That is the last I know."

"Well," said Peter. "You must have hurt yourself when you fell for I -"

A cry of pain from the boy interrupted him. "My ankle," he complained rubbing his foot with both hands. Peter pulled down the boy's sock and found the ankle was swollen and blue.

"It is sprained, I'm afraid," he said. "tell me who you are and I will carry you home."

"My name is Gregory," said the lad. "I was going to the store for my father and I -"

At this moment Gregory reached to his pocket and finding it empty began frantically searching his clothes. "I've lost my father's money!" he cried. "He gave me his pocketbook with all his money in it and now it's gone!"

"Well," consoled Peter, "He will not beat you, you know."

"Worse than that," replied Gregory. "If he does not have his money he cannot pay the King's taxes and he will be thrown into prison!"

"Well," said Peter. "You probably lost it along the way when you fell."

"Oh yes," cried Gregory. "I shall go at once and look." And forgetting his twisted ankle he tried to rise to his feet. Instantly he fell back. "I can't move," he wept. "Oh, what shall I do?"

"I -" began Peter. He was about to say that he was in a most terrible hurry to get to the King's castle but young Gregory looked at him so pleadingly that he hadn't the heart to refuse him, "Never mind," he told the lad. "You rest quietly here. I will go and search the road."

He left the hurt child in the barn and returned to the road and carefully searched the spot where he had found the boy. He pushed the snow back with his bare hands and reached under every fallen log to see if by chance the purse had flown there as the boy toppled down the ravine.

But there was no sign of the missing money. "Perhaps some thief stole it from Gregory as he lay here," thought Peter. "If so I am sure I shall never find it."

He was just about to give up and return to the barn when he noticed a strange thing. There on a white patch of snow was a drop of blood! Several inches away was another drop, and then another, so that a trail of red drops led into the woods.

"Well," cried Peter. "Perhaps if I follow this trail I shall come upon the thief who stole the purse!" And he plunged into the woods without even stopping to think of what danger might lie ahead.

DEWEY GIVES AWAY THE MAGIC SWORD

All morning Peter followed the trail of blood through the woods. At times it was quite difficult because in places the snow had melted away and there was nothing to be seen on the hard brown grass.

Again and again he lost the trail and spent precious minutes searching. Finally, in mid-afternoon, he lost it for good. He had come to a patch of dry ground and there was no sign of the thief whom Peter believed to have stolen Gregory's purse.

"It has all been a waste of time," thought Peter as he sat down to rest. He leaned against a big oak tree and shut his eyes with weariness. He had been sitting there only a few moments when he heard the sound of violent scuffling and two voices chattering noisily.

He looked around but could see nothing. "I must have been dreaming," he thought and shut his eyes once more. But again came the scuffling - this time louder than ever.

Peter leaped up and looked carefully around but still he could see nothing. Now, however, the chattering was quite plain and it seemed to come from the tree itself! It was a large oak with a trunk almost three feet wide. One side of the trunk was hollowed out so that the roots of the tree made a tiny house.

Bending over Peter peered in and almost cried aloud at what he saw.



QUICKLY THE BOY REACHED IN.

There were two big squabbits and three baby squabbits. And the largest squabbit who was the father of the little ones was very busy with his teeth and paws tearing apart a small black purse!

Now a squabbit, you know, is a little animal that is half squirrel and half rabbit. He is very much of a home-body and he likes nothing better than to make his home warm and snug with pieces of silk

cloth.

"That is my thief," smiled Peter with relief. And he saw that the father squabbit had a tiny cut on his mouth where the clasp of the purse had torn his lip. The big squabbit had found the purse lying by Gregory and had tried to tear it apart at once in order to get the silk lining for his home. But the clasp tore his mouth so he dragged the whole thing home where Mrs. Squabbit could help him.

Peter cleared his throat gently and the squabbits looked up in alarm and then darted to the far corner of their little house. Quickly the boy reached in and drew out the purse. He emptied the money into his hand and put the silk bag back in the hollowed tree.

"There," he said. "You have the lining and I shall have the money."

When Peter returned to the barn with the money jingling in his pocket Gregory was overjoyed. "You are very brave," he said. "For the thief might have been dangerous and you might have been badly hurt. You knew this but you went after him anyway. Please take this to remember me by." And he pushed a small object into Peter's hand.

"I want nothing," protested Peter. But to his surprise, Gregory was already on his feet and walking out of the barn door as though he had never had a sprained ankle in his life.

"What a strange boy!" thought Peter in amazement. "I know he was hurt for I myself saw how swollen and blue his ankle was."

But Peter couldn't know that the boy wasn't named Gregory at all. He was Dewey, the whistlemaker of Santa Land. And the object he gave to Peter was the beautiful little sword which Santa had made and carved with the figures of all the great heroes of history.

"Give it to the bravest boy you can find," Santa had told Dewey. And Dewey had given it to Peter. Peter put the sword in his pocket with the golden key the sick woman had given him and the ivory horse the rude old man had given him.

"Now I must truly hurry," he thought grimly: "For I must save Santa's sled and reindeer before another week is done."

Chapter 12

PETER MEETS THE ROOZOO BIRD

Little Peter had covered only half the distance to the King's castle. His shoes were worn through with so much walking and his feet were blistered from the pebbles on the road.

"Oh, I shall never reach the castle in time," he moaned as he sat on a big rock beside the road in order to dig a small stone out of his shoe. "Perhaps if I had not stayed to help the old man and the sick woman and poor Gregory I should be there by now."

Thinking of the strange people who had interrupted his journey he remembered the gifts they had given him. He reached in his pocket and pulled out the ivory horse.

"What a beautiful thing you are," he said aloud. "But what good are you to me? If only you were real I could reach the castle in time."

At this moment a remarkable creature appeared sitting on the toe of Peter's worn shoe. It looked like a vegetable and yet it had hands and feet and a face, too!

"I know how to make that thing into a real horse," said the creature in a shrill voice. Peter looked down in astonishment. "Who are you?" he gasped.

"I am a Roozoo bird, silly," said the creature scornfully. "I've been asleep under this rock for nearly three months, but you woke me with your mumbling to yourself. Now to get rid of you I'm perfectly willing to tell you how to make that horse come alive."

"Oh, do tell me please!" cried Peter eagerly.

"Well," explained the Roozoo bird, "you have simply to say this verse:

"Ibbety doog

Emoc emay

Ibbety doog

Alive, I say!"

"That doesn't sound very sensible," said Peter doubtfully.

"Are you quite sure?"

"Suit yourself," replied the Roozoo bird, tartly. "I can only say that is how I came to be here at all. You see I used to be a potato."

"A potato!" gasped Peter.

The Roozoo bird nodded. "A potato. But one night a strange old man was peeling me for his supper and he said that little verse and I came alive. I like birds so, though I didn't turn into a bird, I called myself a Roozoo bird."

"Well!" exclaimed Peter. "It certainly won't do me any harm to try the verse."

So he put the little ivory horse in the middle of the road and then he said,

"Ibbety doog

Emoc emay

Ibbety doog

Alive, I say!"

But nothing happened at all. Almost crying with disappointment Peter leaned over to pick up the toy but as his fingers closed around it he discovered that it was no longer hard and smooth as ivory. It was soft and warm and hairy!

And even as Peter drew back in amazement the little horse began to grow and grow and grow until it stood taller than Peter himself!

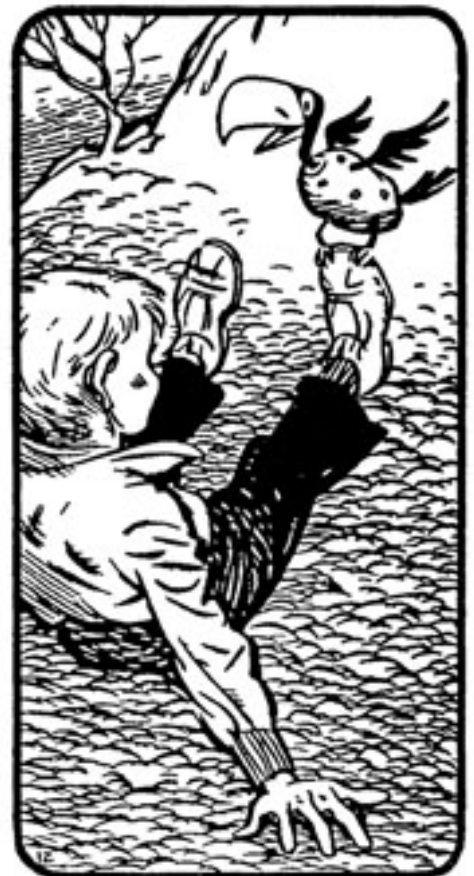
"It's a horse! A real live horse!" cried Peter and this time the tears really did come into his eyes but they were tears of joy. He climbed on the rock so that he could reach the top of the horse's back and then he gave a push and a leap and landed right on the steed's back.

With a cry of thanks to the Roozoo bird, Peter dug his heels into the horse's sides and went galloping off. All along the way folks ran to their doors and windows and watched the boy speed by on the white horse.

"What a horse!" they cried. "Never had such an animal been seen in Aradoone!"

Peter rode on and on, the snow flying from the hoofs of the ivory white horse. "Now," thought the boy happily, "I shall be at the King's castle before another sunset."

And he shouted to the people as he passed, "Be of good cheer for Christmas will surely come again!"



"I AM A ROOZOO BIRD, SILLY."

Chapter 13

PETER ARRIVES AT THE CASTLE

Patrick Tweedleknees and Dewey the Brownie and Sandra the Queen Fairy all returned to Santa Land and told Santa Claus that they had given away his gifts to the strongest, kindest and bravest boy they could find.

Santa Claus seemed very much pleased with what they told him but Mrs. Claus was quite cross.

"I don't understand what you can be thinking of," she told Santa as they sat together at the supper table. "Here it is just a week until Christmas and you're as happy as though you had your sled and reindeer already to go to earth on Christmas Eve."

"Well, my dear," said Santa. Helping himself to his seventh blueberry muffin, "What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know exactly," replied Mrs. Claus, "But it does seem as if you might go down there to that King Uttar's castle and get your sled and reindeer back."

"But," objected Santa, "There would still be the king himself making the people unhappy and after a few more years not even Christmas would cheer them up. No, the people themselves must find out about Uttar imprisoning his own brother - the good King Charles - and perhaps my sled and reindeer will be the means of their finding out the truth."

"Well," said Mrs. Claus stiffly, "I'm sure I don't see how they'll manage but I suppose you know best."

"Spoken like a good wife!" chuckled Santa, shoving back his chair. "Now I'll help you with the dishes."

The next morning Mrs. Claus said, "I had the strangest dream last night. I dreamed that I saw a fair haired boy on a white horse racing through the land of Aradoone."

"You did?" cried Santa greatly excited. "Tell me - what was the horse like?"

"Why," said Mrs. Claus, "He looked like a perfect ivory statue grown into life!"

"It's the one!" said Santa and his face broke into a great smile. "My dear, the Roozoo bird is a great potato!" And he laughed and laughed.

At that very moment Peter was speeding across the land of Aradoone on his great white steed. By dawn he was near enough to see the top of King Uttar's castle high on a cliff.

Meanwhile the guards on top of the castle gate had been watching the cloud of dust which rose from the plains as Peter and the horse came on. The dust rose so thickly that it was a long time before the guards were able to make out the two figures at all.

Then they cried, "Whoever it is will never be able to make the cliff! A horse has never yet climbed it."

But even as they spoke the boy and horse started up the winding path to the castle gate. Not once did the horse stumble although the way was steep and rocky.

Finally the horse came to a stop and the boy jumped down and banged with his fists on the gate.

"What is it?" cried the guard angrily. "Why do you bang on the castle gate?"

"I've come to see the King," shouted the boy and again he banged with his fists on the castle gate.

"Let him in," ordered the captain of the guard. "What harm can a lad like that do? Besides, we'll have his horse for our trouble."

So, with a great creaking of iron hinges the gates swung open and Peter strode into the King's castle. But when two of the soldiers sneaked out to steal the great white horse they found to their astonishment that the horse was nowhere in sight.

Instead there was only a tiny ivory statue and when one of the soldiers picked it up the statue crumbled into dust in his hand.



SANTA LAUGHED AND LAUGHED.

PETER TRIES TO POISON THE KING

Peter had no idea how he was going to rescue Santa's reindeer but he felt that once he got inside the castle he would find a way. So when the soldiers crowded around and demanded to know what he wanted he said the first thing that popped into his head.

"I've come to get a job working for the king!"

The soldiers roared. "Stupid!" they exclaimed. "Did you think the king had time to see the likes of you?"

"What kind of a job did you want?" asked the leader of the soldiers.

"Why," replied Peter calmly, "I thought I would like to be a soldier in the King's guard."

Again the soldiers burst into laughter. Then the leader said, "Send the boy to the kitchen. I've heard they need a dish washer there."

Before Peter could say another word the soldiers had hustled him down the castle corridor into the kitchen. Sardoff, the cook, was making a chestnut pudding for the King's dinner and he was very glad to have Peter wash the dishes as he hadn't had time to wash them for three days. The floor was piled six feet high with plates and saucers and pots and pans.

"Well," thought Peter, "at least I'm in the castle. That's something." And he went to work scrubbing the dishes in the big sink.

Sardoff, the cook, was very jolly and Peter liked him at once. Sardoff told him that he had been a cook for King Charles until he died and after that Uttar had made him cook for him.

"But there's something queer about the way King Charles died," whispered Sardoff. "No one ever saw him after he became ill and no one went to the funeral except Uttar and his soldiers..."



PETER Poured IT INTO THE Pudding.

"Do you know where Santa's sled and reindeer are?" asked Peter

Sardoff sighed. "That I do," he said. "They are locked in the stables and I have orders to cut the reindeer into steaks for the King's Christmas dinner. It's a very sad business but I must obey orders. Now no more talking for I must finish this chestnut pudding for the King."

But while Peter scrubbed away at the dishes a plan was forming in his head. "Suppose I should put poison in the King's pudding," he thought. "Then he would die and it would be very easy to free Santa's reindeer."

He looked under the sink and sure enough there was a bottle of cleaning fluid there and it was marked "Poison." After a while Sardoff went into the pantry to get some vanilla for the pudding and Peter grabbed up the bottle of poison and poured half of it into the pudding.

Sardoff came back with the vanilla and finished the pudding. Then he put it in the oven to bake. Presently it was done and Sardoff put it on a silver plate to set before the King.

And then a strange thing happened. The Captain of the King's Guards came into the kitchen and said, "Ready, Sardoff?"

"Ready," answered Sardoff. And with that he began tasting the various dishes he had prepared for the King's dinner. He sipped the turtle soup and bit off a piece of roast turkey and ate one honey bun.

"Why are you tasting the King's food?" asked Peter, his heart pounding with fear.

"Listen to the boy to ask a stupid question!" cried the Captain of the guard. "The King has enemies, silly, and it one should put poison in his food, Sardoff here would be the one to die."

"Oh," whispered Peter and he saw with horror that Sardoff had finished sampling the alligator pear salad and was about to taste the chestnut pudding.

"Don't! Don't!" cried Peter.

"Eh?" said old Sardoff, looking up in a puzzled fashion.

"What's the matter with the stupid boy?" said the Guard. "Come, Sardoff, I'm in a hurry."

Sardoff picked up a big round spoon and was about to dip it into the chestnut pudding when Peter suddenly hurled himself against the fat cook's stomach and the whole silver tray, pudding and all, dashed to the floor.

"You scoundrel!" roared the Captain in a terrible rage. "I'll have you in the dungeon for this!" and he clutched Peter's arm and dragged him from the kitchen.

"Well," thought Peter miserably. "My first plan has failed but anyway Sardoff is saved and I shall think of something else. I will - no matter what they do to me!"

Chapter 15

PETER CLEANS THE KING'S BOOTS

As the guard led Peter from the kitchen the little boy pretended to burst into tears. He threw his arms over his face and sobbed violently.

"Don't put me in the dungeon," he begged, "I'll do anything if you just give me a chance,"

The guard laughed. "What can you do?" he cried. "You who can't even wash dishes in the kitchen!"

"Just try me," pleaded Peter. "I'll clean your room and polish your weapons and tend your horse. Anything! Only do not throw me into prison."

Now it happened, that although this captain was very high the King's service, a part of his job was extremely hateful to him. He had, every day, to clean and polish all of the shoes and boots in the King's wardrobe.

So important was this polishing that Uttar would allow no one less than his captain to do it. But the captain felt, understandably enough, that he was far superior to such menial work.

It occurred to him that he might turn this task over to Peter and no one would be the wiser. Peter was overjoyed when the soldier told him this plan.

"You are very good to me!" he cried. "How kind you are!"

"I do not intend to be kind," retorted the guard, giving the boy's arm a twist. "I am relieving myself of a distasteful job. If you do not do it perfectly, I shall throw you in the dungeon before you have time to even blink your eyes!"

With that he shut Peter up in a pantry where a pair of the King's finest boots were waiting to be polished. What splendid boots they were! And how dirty!

Peter set to work scrubbing down the soft leather. He polished so hard that the sweat poured down his face and when he was through, the boots were positively shining.

"Now," thought Peter, "I'll fix it so the King will throw this soldier in the dungeon and I will be free to find Santa's reindeer."

He hunted in a corner cupboard until he found a large jar of glue. He poured half of this sticky goo into one boot and half into the other.

"The King will be so angry," he thought, "that he'll not give the guard a chance to explain." The thought of what would happen to the mean guard so delighted Peter that he couldn't help laughing aloud.

At this moment the guard himself returned. He examined the shining boots and nodded his satisfaction.

"Even a stupid boy like you can shine boots," he said and he gave Peter's ear a slap just to remind him that he was a stupid boy.

Then he put the boots under his arm and started for the King's room. But on the way he stopped off in his own guard room.

"I must say," he thought. I've never seen these boots so shining. How handsome they are! How I should like to try them myself!"

And then he said aloud, "Well, why not? Who would ever know?"

Quickly the captain pulled off his own shoes and pushed his feet into the King's boots.

He was surprised, then bewildered, as his feet sunk into the soft squishy glue. Then his face turned black with rage as he realized that his feet were stuck!

He screamed for his soldiers and when they arrived he sent them rushing for Peter.

Poor Peter! As the soldiers dragged him away he thought, "My second plan failed! How shall I ever be able to save Santa's reindeer now!"



WHAT SPLENDID BOOTS THEY WERE.

PETER TRIES THE GOLDEN KEY

Six great bearded soldiers with lighted torches led Peter down three winding corridors until they came to a huge iron door. It took three of the soldiers to turn the key in the lock and push the door open. On the other side was a narrow flight of stairs down which the soldiers dragged the boy.

The light from the torches cast strange reflections on the cold damp walls but as they descended lower and lower even the torches seemed to flicker and grow dim.

When they reached the bottom of the stairs there was another flight to descend and after that, another, and still another. At last they reached the last stair and there was another heavy door which the guards must unlock and push open with all their strength. When it was thrown open the light of the torches fell on a row of tiny cells.

Peter could hear a low moaning but it was so dark he couldn't see the prisoners who stood behind the barred doors. The soldiers threw him into the nearest cell and marched away leaving only one small torch to light the dungeon.

Peter shivered and drew his jacket high around his throat. He felt like crying because he was quite frightened but he knew that tears would do him no good. He felt his way to the side of the cell and suddenly gave a cry of astonishment for his hand had touched a man's arm.

"W - who are you?" he quavered.

The arm stirred and a man slowly turned and faced Peter. The light of the torch was so dim that all the boy could see was a thin figure of a man with a narrow face and a long beard.

"I am Charles," said the man in a harsh voice. "King of Aradoone."

Peter's eyes widened with amazement. "But you - you are dead!" he gasped for he well remembered how Uttar had become King on the death of his brother, Charles.

The man laughed grimly. "That is what my brother has told the world," he said. "But he himself cast me into this dungeon 18 months ago and made himself king."

"But - why don't you escape?" cried Peter.

"How escape?" asked Charles bitterly. "You saw how many locked doors lie between us and freedom. There's not a chance of getting out. I'll be here until I die and so will you."

"Not I!" cried Peter, "I must get out - and soon."

And he told Charles the story of Santa's sled and reindeer which were locked in the King's stables.

"So you see I must escape," he finished. "Or there will be no more Christmas in Aradoone. And you must escape too, for only by restoring you as rightful king will the people ever be happy again."

"Yes, that is true," agreed Charles. "But only magic will save us."

"Well, then," said Peter, "I believe I have that magic."

"What!" cried Charles. "You have magic?"

Then Peter told him about the ivory horse that had become a real live horse when he most needed it.

"But a horse will do us no good here," said Charles.

"No," agreed Peter, "but I also have a golden key!" And he pulled out of his pocket the tiny gold key the sick mother had given him.

Charles examined the key eagerly. At last he was beginning to have hope. "Try it!" he exclaimed, his hands shaking with excitement. "Try it at once!"

Quickly Peter stuck the key in the padlock which bound the cell door.

"It's too small!" he gasped, tears of disappointment springing to his eyes.

Charles bent over the lock. "Wait!" he whispered. And a moment later he cried, "It is getting larger! It is growing to the size of the lock! It fits exactly!"

And suddenly he turned the key and the padlock fell open!



"TRY IT AT ONCE!"

PETER AND CHARLES ATTEND A MASQUERADE

Peter and Charles, the real King of Aradoone, hugged each other with joy when the magic golden key unlocked their cell.

“Let us free the other prisoners at once!” cried Peter pushing open the door and stepping into the corridor.

“Wait, my boy,” said Charles. “Let us first attempt to find my brother, Uttar. After that all men will be free”

He took down the tiny torch from the wall and approached the first heavy iron door. He put the golden key in the lock until Charles was able to turn it with a twist of his fingers. The great door swung open as if it were pushed by unseen hands!

Slowly the man and boy climbed the long flights of stairs. When they came to the top of the last flight, they sat down to rest, Charles was panting with exhaustion for it was a long time since he had climbed a stair, and he was very weak.

“I hear strange sounds beyond the door,” he said, blowing out the torch. “Like bands playing.”

Peter crept to the door and listened with his ear pressed against the key hole. “It is music!” he exclaimed. “Perhaps Uttar is having a ball.”

That is exactly what Uttar was having. It was a Masquerade Ball. Everyone was dressed in strange costumes. Some guests were dressed up as Indians, some as animals, some as clowns. Some men wore crowns - pretending they were kings.

The music played so loudly and everyone was so busy dancing and laughing that no one noticed the big iron door to the dungeon steps which slowly opened just wide enough for two to enter.

Peter and Charles crept down the long corridors until they stood at the entrance of the Great Ballroom. No one paid the slightest attention to them.

“Dance!” whispered Charles to Peter. “They believe we are masqueraders!” And, without another word, he reached out and took the arm of a black haired woman who was dressed up like a butterfly. The two of them danced away, circling the ball room.

A young girl wearing the costume of gypsy took Peter’s arm. “What are you suppose to be?” she asked.

Peter looked down at his poor worn clothes. “Why,” he replied quickly, “I - I am dressed as a beggar.”

The girl threw back her head and laughed merrily. “You look more like a rag man!” she exclaimed. “Come - dance with me.”

Peter had no idea how to dance but he stumbled around rather well, holding the girl in his arms in the proper way for dancing. Then he said, “Which is King Uttar?”

“Haven’t you seen him?” asked the girl. “He has the most amusing costume! He is dressed like a bunny rabbit.” She leaned close to Peter’s ear and whispered, “He should be dressed like a wolf for that is what he is really. Whatever shall



“LOOK! THERE GOES THE KING NOW.”

we do without Christmas!” Then she pointed over Peter’s shoulder. “Look! There goes the King now!”

Peter turned in time to see a man dressed in the costume of a soft brown rabbit who was just leaving the ball room. “What a strange costume for the King to wear!” thought Peter. “But what a perfect masquerade it is!”

And truly it was an excellent costume. Uttar had it made by the best tailors in Aradoone. The tailors had skinned a hundred and three rabbits to make one rabbit skin large enough to fit the King.

Just at that moment Peter saw Charles following Uttar from the room.

“Excuse me,” said Peter to the girl and he turned away and strode after the two kings.

He had no idea what was going to happen but as he left the room his fingers went to his pocket and closed around the tiny steel sword which Gregory had given him.

“Perhaps,” he thought, “Like the ivory horse and the golden key, it is a sword of magic and will serve me well.”

CHARLES FACES HIS BROTHER

King Uttar had a bad headache and left the ball to go to his study. He thought if he took off the heavy rabbit costume which he wore he would feel better for the soft fur was very warm.

The soldiers who stood about the corridors saluted the King as he passed but he was in such a raging bad humor that he scarcely noticed them. It was a very funny sight: a five foot bunny rabbit rushing through the halls while soldiers stood at attention and solemnly saluted!

Uttar entered his study but before he had time to unfasten the rabbit costume the door was flung open and a tall man with a long beard entered.

Uttar gasped for he instantly recognized his brother Charles, the rightful King of Aradoone. But at the same time he realized how much Charles had changed during his months in prison. He had grown many pounds thinner and a long beard disguised his face.

“No one would recognize him!” thought Uttar. And with that a plan came to him. He would pretend that he himself did not recognize Charles.

“Who are you and what do you want here?” he asked finally.

Charles crossed the room and stood before his brother. “You know very well who I am,” he said quietly. “And you know what I want.”

Uttar’s face beneath the rabbit skin was white with fear. But he still pretended not to recognize Charles.

“Get out at once or I will call a guard!” he shouted.

“Call your guard,” replied Charles calmly. “Or I will call him myself and have you put in chains.”

“You’re a crazy man!” screamed Uttar and he ran to the door and shouted for his guard.

In a moment the Captain of his soldiers entered.

He was the very same Captain who had thrown Peter into prison. And he was as wicked as Uttar himself.

“Throw this man into the dungeon,” ordered Uttar pointing to his brother. “He has gone out of his head and has threatened me.”

The guard turned to Charles and flung him to the floor. “I am Charles, your rightful King!” cried Charles, trying to escape the soldier’s blows. But the soldier either did not recognize Charles or, like Uttar, pretended he did not. He pulled his sword and pointed it at Charles’s breast.

At this very moment Peter entered the study, his tiny steel sword in his hand. He threw himself between Charles and the astounded guard.

“This is your real King!” he cried.

“Destroy him! Destroy him!” screamed Uttar who was now frightened nearly out of his wits and did not know who might next enter his study.

“If you touch me,” said Peter quietly, “you will perish at the point of my sword.”

The guard broke into a laugh at the sight of the tiny plaything which Peter held in his hand. But as he lunged towards the boy the little magic sword in Peter’s hand sprang out four feet long and instantly pierced the heart of the guard.

Uttar’s eyes widened with fear as he saw his Guard fall to the floor. He stared first at Peter and then at his brother Charles. Then, almost blind with fright, he ran screaming from the room and fled towards the Great Ballroom, followed by Peter and Charles.

As they burst among the astonished guests a tiny little man dressed like a ghouel stepped forward.

“It’s time to claim my reward,” he said mysteriously and burst into a screeching laugh.



THE GUARD BROKE INTO A LAUGH.

THE END OF KING UTTAR

The guests fell back in amazement as Uttar, dressed in rabbit costume, came in their midst followed by two strangers, man and boy.

Uttar was quaking with fear and he tried to hide behind the guests as he pointed at the two strangers.

“Destroy those two!” he ordered in a high cracked voice. “They are murderers!”

The guests stared at their king. “What can be the matter?” they whispered to one another. “Surely the King must have gone mad!”

Then Charles turned and faced the crowd. “Do you not recognize me?” he asked. “I am Charles, your rightful King.”

“Take off the beard!” cried several men who thought Charles was merely a guest in costume like themselves.

“I cannot take it off,” replied Charles. “It has grown there since my wicked brother cast me into prison 18 months ago - and in prison I would be still had not this lad come to my aid.” And he put his arm around Peter’s shoulder.

The strange little man dressed like a ghoulish stepped forward and said, “Let us shave your beard then!”

And from some mysterious place in his costume he drew forth a razor. Before anyone could say a word the ghoulish shaved the beard from Charles’ face!

A gasp of joy and astonishment rose from the crowd. “It is Charles! Good King Charles!” And a great cheer came from every throat.

As they cheered, little Peter slipped through the crowd and headed for the castle courtyard. The magic sword had vanished from his hand after he had killed the guard.

“I must free Santa’s reindeer at once.” he thought as he hurried out of the gate and towards the stables. There was no one to stop him as all the soldiers had gone to the ball room to see what had happened.

But when he had found the reindeer and unlocked their chains with his magic golden key, the funny little man dressed like a ghoulish suddenly appeared by his side.

“What a strange costume you have,” remarked Peter as he harnessed the reindeer to Santa’s old sled. “I never saw a man dressed like a ghoulish before.”

“It’s not a costume,” replied the visitor pleasantly. “I am a ghoulish and I was the one who stole Santa’s reindeer.”

“You!” cried Peter angrily. And he turned on the ghoulish to strike him.

But the ghoulish stepped aside and waved his hand. “I did it for a very handsome reward,” he said.

“The King promised me a soft furry pet if I should bring him the reindeer.”

“Pet!” cried Peter, madder than ever.

“Oh, yes,” replied the ghoulish calmly. “A fine soft furry pet - and here it comes now!”

At this very instant Uttar came racing into the stable - his rabbit costume all askew. Behind him raced all the guests who had turned on him in fury when they recognized King Charles.

The little ghoulish stepped forward and said, “Uttar, you promised to give me a soft furry pet as my reward. Now - ”

“Don’t talk to me of pets,” squealed Uttar, tears running down his rabbit cheeks. “Save me! Save me!”

The crowd was closing in on him and the ghoulish smiled. “I will get my reward and save you at the same time,” he said.

He waved his hand and before the gaze of the startled crowd Uttar began to grow smaller and smaller. In about half a minute he was only 10 inches long and in place of the wicked old man in a rabbit costume there stood a soft quivering bunny.

Picking up the bunny the ghoulish stuffed him in his coat pocket and vanished between the cracks of the stable floor.



THE GHOUL PICKED UP THE BUNNY.

Chapter 20

CHRISTMAS COMES TO ARADOONE

It had begun to snow but the great crowd of people who were dancing with joy in the courtyard of the Castle scarcely noticed it. They carried the good King Charles on their shoulders and cheered madly.

Meantime, little Peter had harnessed Santa's eight reindeer to the sled and driven it into the courtyard. The crowd made way for him and someone began singing a Christmas carol. The others took up the tune and in an instant everyone was singing joyously.

Peter knew that once the reindeer were freed they would find their own way to Santa Land. But just as he was about to step out of the sled a strange thing happened. It was as if an unseen hand pulled him back in the sled and held him there.

In another moment the reindeer stamped fiercely at the ground and then began to rise, pulling the sled after them. Slowly they moved into the night sky and circled over the castle courtyard. And then, with the song of carolers ringing in his ears, Peter fell sound asleep in the bottom of the sleigh.

While he slept, the reindeer landed in Santa Land. The elves and goblins and fairies joined hands and danced madly around the sled singing with joy.

Then Santa ran out of his cottage, dragging a huge empty sack behind him.

"Hurry ! Hurry !" he cried. "Load the sled!"

The little workers dashed to the toy shops and brought forth load after load of wagons and skates and dolls and tops and footballs and bicycles and every imaginable game that children love to play.

They filled the sled to overflowing leaving just enough room for Peter who still lay deep in sleep on the floor.

Then Santa filled his bag with candies - with butter crunch and wintergreens and peanut brittle and caramels and bonbons that Mrs. Claus had spent the day making. And besides the candy Santa packed in marbles and knives and wrist watches and fancy necklaces and hair ribbons and toy boats and tiny soldiers and all manner of things which could be stuffed into a child's stocking.

At last all was ready, and with Santa at the reins, the reindeer rose once again into the sky. And still little Peter slept, ignorant of all that had happened since he left the King's castle.

When at last he awoke he found himself in his own bed in his own house in Aradoone. Scarcely had he wiped the sleepy seeds from his eyes when the door opened and his seven brothers and seven sisters burst into the room.

"Peter! Peter! Wake up!" they cried, crowding about him. "It is Christmas morning."

"What a Christmas! Santa has brought us everything we ever dreamed of!"

"And see! Just come see what he has left for you!"

They let Peter into the living room and there beneath the Christmas tree was a beautiful steel sword with Peter's name engraved on the hilt. Beside it was a gold watch and chain and, as a charm on the chain, a little golden key.

Grinning with happiness Peter went to the window and looked out. Sure enough a beautiful white horse stood harnessed to the gate post.

"Is it mine?" asked Peter softly.

"All yours!" chorused his brothers and sisters, and they gave him the card they'd found tied to the horse.

The card was from Santa Claus and it said, "Merry Christmas to Peter who brought a Merry Christmas to Aradoone."

"And a Merry Christmas to all the world!" cried all the family together.

THE END



"HURRY! HURRY!" HE CRIED.

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