



H. MILLAR '91

A
STORY
FOR
CHILDREN

FROM THE FRENCH OF E. LABOULAYE.

THREE or four hundred years ago there lived at Skalholt, in Iceland, an old peasant, who was no more rich in wisdom than in fortune. Whilst at church one day the good man heard a fine sermon on charity. "Give to him that asketh thee," said the preacher, "and it shall be returned unto thee a hundred-fold." The peasant's attention was taken by these constantly-repeated words, which confused still more his already clouded faculties. Hardly had he returned home than he began to cut down the trees of his garden, to dig up the soil, and to pile up stones and wood as though he were about to build a palace.

"What are you doing there, my poor man?" asked his wife.

"Call me no longer 'my poor man,'" said the peasant, in a solemn voice; "we are rich, my dear wife, or at least we are going to be. In a fortnight's time I am going to give away my cow and —"

"Our cow! our only resource!" cried the wife, "we shall die of hunger."

"Hold your tongue, you silly woman," replied the peasant; "it is easy to see you understand nothing of our pastor's Latin. In giving away our cow, we shall receive a hundred back as a reward. The pastor said so. I shall shelter fifty beasts in the stable I am building, and with the value of fifty others

I shall buy pasture enough to feed our herd in summer as in winter. We shall be richer than the King."

And without heeding either the prayers or reproaches of his wife, our simpleton began to build his stable, to the great astonishment of his neighbours.

This work finished, the good man slipped a cord round the neck of his cow and led it direct to the pastor's house. He found him talking to two strangers, whom he hardly glanced at, so eager was he to make his present and to receive his reward.

The pastor was amazed at such a new species of charity. He gave a lengthy explanation to the foolish fellow to show him that the Bible only spoke of spiritual rewards. It was of no use; the peasant only repeated, "You said so, sir, you said so." Wearied at last of reasoning with such a blockhead, the pastor broke forth in holy wrath, and slammed his door in the face of the peasant, who, perfectly astounded, stood rooted to the spot, repeating incessantly, "You said so, you said so." However, he had to return home; no easy matter. It was in spring; the ice was melting, and the wind swept the snow in great drifts. At every step the man slipped, the cow bellowed, and refused to advance. In an hour's time the peasant had missed the path, and was in fear of losing his life. He stopped in perplexity, knowing no more what to do than the animal which he led. Whilst he stood in doubt, a man, laden with a great sack, came up to him and asked him what he was doing in such bad weather with his cow.

When the peasant had told him his grievance, the stranger replied, "My good man,

take my advice, and make an exchange with me. I live near here; let me have your cow, which you will never succeed in leading back to your house, and take this sack; it is not very heavy, and everything it contains is worth having."

The bargain concluded, the stranger led away the cow. The peasant, hoisting the sack, which he found terribly heavy, on his back, set off on his way home.

In great trepidation at the reproaches and jeers of his wife, he entered the cottage and burst into a long description of the dangers he had incurred, and how, like the clever man he was, he had exchanged a dying cow for a sack full of treasures. On hearing this fine story, the woman began to show her displeasure; whereupon her husband implored her to restrain her bad temper, and make no delay in putting her largest saucepan on the fire. "You will thank me," he said, "when you see what I have brought you."

Upon which he opened the sack, and behold, out of its depths came a little man all clothed in grey, like a mouse!

"Good-day, good people," he said with all the dignity of a prince. "I hope that, instead of boiling me, you will supply me with something to eat. This little expedition has given me a good appetite."

The peasant fell upon his stool as though he had been thunder-struck.

"There," said his wife, "I was sure of it. Here is a new folly. But what can you expect from a husband? He is certain to do something idiotic! We have lost the cow by which we lived, and now that we have nothing left, you bring us another mouth to feed! I wish you had remained under the snow, sir, you, and your sack, and your treasure!"

The good lady would have gone on talking if the little grey man had not pointed out to her that big words do not fill the pot, and that the wisest thing to do was to sally forth in search of game.

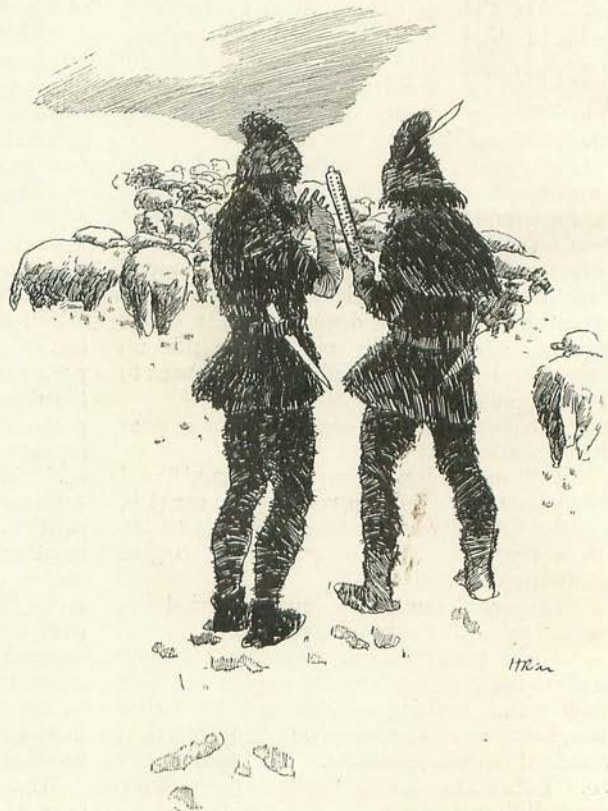
Saying this, he went out in spite of the wind and the snow, and after some time returned with a great sheep.

"There," he said, "kill this

animal for me, and do not let us die of hunger."

The old man and his wife glanced at each other across the little man and his prey. This windfall looked remarkably like a theft. But hunger silences all qualms of conscience. Lawful or not, the sheep was devoured with the greatest relish. From that day, plenty reigned in the home of the peasant. Sheep succeeded sheep, and the good man, more credulous than ever, began to think that, after all, he had gained by his bargain, since instead of the hundred cows he expected, Heaven had sent him such an expert purveyor as the little grey man.

One story is good till another is heard. Though the sheep multiplied in the old man's cottage, they diminished visibly in the Royal flock, which grazed in the vicinity. The chief shepherd, becoming uneasy, informed the King that, for some time, in spite of the increasing vigilance of the watch, the finest animals of the flock disappeared one after the other. Without doubt, some clever thief must have taken up his abode in the neighbourhood. Before long it became known



"THE SHEEP DIMINISHED VISIBLY IN THE ROYAL FLOCK."

that there was a stranger from no one knew where, and whom nobody knew, staying in the peasant's cottage. The King ordered that he should be brought before him. The little grey man set out boldly; but the peasant and his wife began to feel conscience-stricken as they thought of the thieves and their accomplices who were hung on the same gibbet.

When the little grey man appeared at Court, the King asked him if, by chance, he had heard that five fine sheep had been stolen from the Royal flock.

"Yes, your Majesty," answered the little man; "I took them myself."

"By what right?" said the King.

"Your Majesty," replied the little man, "I took them for an old man and his wife, who were dying of hunger, whilst you had plenty and to spare. You cannot even spend the tenth part of your revenue, and I thought it only right that these good people should live on what you had no need of, rather than die of starvation."

The King was thunderstruck at such audacity; he eyed the little man with a look that boded nothing good. "It is evident," he said, "that your greatest talent is stealing."

The little man bowed with an air of self-conscious modesty.

"Well, you deserve to be hanged," said the King, "but I pardon you on condition that to-morrow at this time you shall have taken from my herdsmen my black bull, which is guarded with the greatest care."

"Your Majesty," answered the little grey man, "your condition is impossible. How do you think I can elude such vigilance?"

"Unless you do it," replied the King, "you shall be hanged."

And with a wave of his hand he dismissed our thief, who heard, as he passed out, derisive whispers of: "You will be hanged! You will be hanged!"

The little grey man returned to the cottage of the peasant, where he was warmly welcomed by the old man and his wife.

But he said nothing to them, except that he was in need of a rope, and that he was going away the next morning at daybreak. They gave him the old halter of the cow, and then he went to bed and slept peacefully.

At dawn, with the earliest beams of the rising sun, the little grey man went out, taking his cord with him. He strode into the forest, by the path usually used by the King's herdsmen, and selecting a big oak in full view, he hung himself by the neck to the largest branch. But he was very careful not to make a slip-knot.

Very soon afterwards two herdsmen passed by, leading the black bull.



"GOOD-BYE, OLD CHAP."

"Halloa!" said one of them, "here is our rascal, who has got what he deserved. Good-bye, old chap; you won't steal the King's bull now."

As soon as the herdsmen were out of sight, the little grey man came down from the tree, and taking a short cut hung himself once more to a great oak close by the road. Imagine the surprise of the herdsmen, when they caught sight of him again!

"Who is that?" said one. "Are my eyes deceiving me? Here is the little man we saw hanging over yonder!"

"How stupid you are!" said the other. "How can a man be hanged in two places at the same time? It is another thief, that is all."

"I tell you it is the same," replied the first shepherd; "I recognise his coat and his grin."

"I bet you," answered the second, who was of an independent turn of mind, "that it is a different man."

The wager was accepted. The two men fastened the King's bull to a tree, and ran back to the first oak. But while they were running the little grey man jumped down from his gibbet, and quietly led the bull to the peasant's house. There was great rejoicing, and the animal was put into the stable until it should be sold.

When the two herdsmen returned to the palace in the evening, they hung their heads and looked so dejected that the King saw at once he had been duped. He sent for the little grey man, who appeared with all the serenity of a great mind.

"You have stolen my bull!" said the King.

"Your Majesty," replied the little man, "I have only obeyed your orders."

"Very well," said the King; "here are ten gold crowns to pay for my bull; but if within two days you do not manage to steal the sheets off my bed while I am in it, you shall be hanged."

"Your Majesty," said the little man, "pray

do not ask me to do any such thing. You are so well guarded that a poor man like me could never even approach the palace."

"Unless you do it," answered the King, "I shall have the pleasure of seeing you hanged."

That night the little grey man, who had returned to the cottage, provided himself with a long rope and a basket. In this basket, lined with moss, he placed a cat and her kittens, and then he went out. Gliding noiselessly through the darkness he reached the palace, and climbed upon the roof without being perceived by anyone. To enter a garret, where with the help of a saw he quickly made a neat opening in the floor, was for our clever little fellow the work of a few moments.

On reaching the King's bedroom, he proceeded to carefully uncover the Royal bed, and after placing the cat and her kittens in the centre, he arranged it neatly again, and then, by the aid of his rope, climbed upon the canopy, where he sat down to await the result.

The palace clock struck eleven as the King and Queen entered their chamber. The light having been extinguished, the Queen was about to step into bed, when she uttered

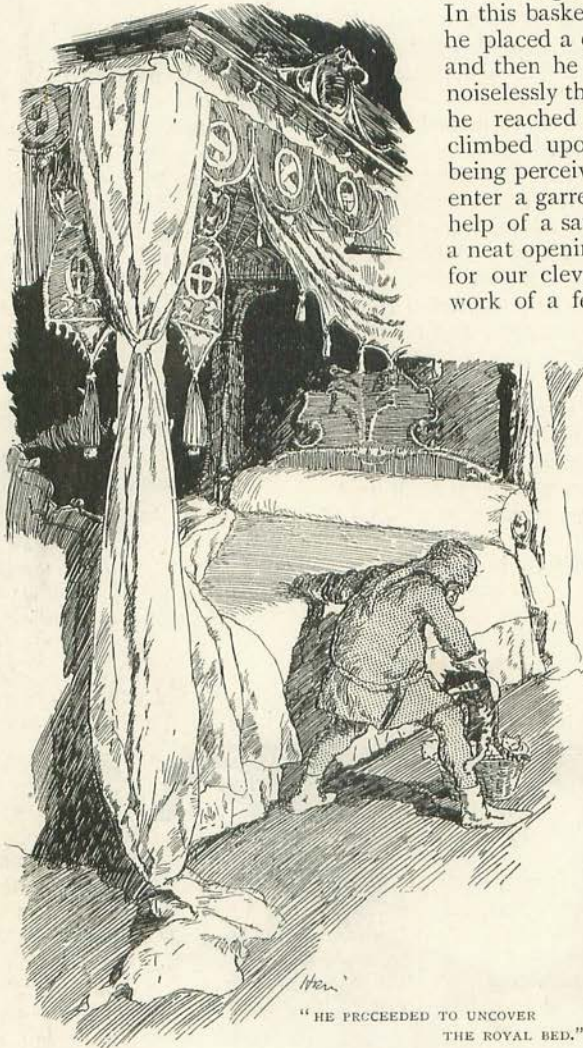
HE PROCEEDED TO UNCOVER
THE ROYAL BED.

a shrill scream and ran to the further end of the room.

"What is the matter? Are you mad?" said the King. "You will rouse the whole palace."

"Do not get into bed," answered the Queen; "my foot touched something warm and soft."

"Why not say at once that there is a hob-



goblin in the bed?" replied the King, laughing contemptuously. "All women are as timid as hares, and as senseless."

Upon which, like a true hero, he bravely entered the bed, but as quickly jumped out again, howling frantically and dragging with him the cat, whose claws were firmly embedded in the calf of his leg.

At the cries of the King, the sentinel hastened to the door, and knocking three times with his halberd, inquired if assistance was needed.

"Silence!" shouted the King, ashamed of his weakness, and not wishing to make an exhibition of himself.

He struck the tinder-box, re-lit the lamp, and on going towards the bed, discovered in the middle the cat, who had returned to her place and was quietly licking her kittens.

"This is too bad!" he exclaimed; "the impudent animal has no regard for our crown, and has chosen our Royal bed as a snug corner for her kittens. Wait a moment, little wretch; I will soon give you your reward!"

"She will bite you," cried the Queen; "she may be mad."

"There is nothing to be alarmed at, my dear," said the good King. He then took the sheets by the four corners, and, tying them together with cat and kittens inside, he rolled all together in the blanket and counterpane, and threw the enormous bundle out of the window.

"Now we will go into the next room," he said to the Queen, "and since we have had our revenge, we may hope to sleep in peace."

The King slept, and we may imagine pleasant dreams refreshed his slumbers; but while he slept a little man climbed upon the roof, and, with the aid of a rope, slipped quickly down into the courtyard. He began to search for some invisible object, which, having found, he hoisted on his back, and was soon after hastening along the snow-covered road. The sentinels thought they had seen some phantom, and wondered what those cries they had heard, like those of a new-born infant, could mean.

When the King awoke the next morning he began to think over the events of the previous night. A dim suspicion dawned upon his mind that he had been the victim of some practical joke, and that its author was probably the little grey man. He sent for him immediately. The little man arrived, carrying on his shoulders the sheets neatly folded, and falling with bended knees before the Queen, he said humbly:—

"Your Majesty is aware that I have only carried out the King's orders; I hope your Majesty will be gracious enough to pardon me."

"I pardon you," replied the Queen, "on condition that we see you no more, or else I shall die of fright with your tricks."

"But *I* do not pardon you," said the King, very much annoyed that the Queen should have taken upon herself to act without consulting her lord and master. "Look here, you rogue, you shall be hanged to-morrow night, unless you have managed before then to steal the Queen herself!"

"Your Majesty," cried the little man, "let me be hanged at once, for you would spare me twenty-four hours of anxiety. How could I attempt such a thing? It would be easier to steal the moon."

"That is your business, not mine," replied the King. "In the meantime, the gallows shall be prepared."

The little man left the Court in despair, burying his head in his hands, and sobbing pitifully; the King laughed joyfully.

In the dusk of evening a holy monk, carrying a rosary in his hand and a bag under his arm, came to the palace to beg as usual for his convent. When the Queen had



"A HOLY MONK."

given him her contribution, "Madam," said the monk, "Heaven will reward so much charity. I bring with me even now its recompense. To-morrow, as you are aware, a poor fellow, whose guilt is undoubtedly great, is to be hanged within the palace."

"Alas!" answered the Queen, "I pardon him willingly. I would gladly have saved his life."

"That cannot be," said the monk; "but this man, who is half a wizard, can make you a valuable present before he dies. I know that he possesses three wonderful secrets, of which one alone is worth a kingdom. He can bequeath one of these secrets to any woman who has had compassion on him."

"What are these secrets?" inquired the Queen.

"With the knowledge of the first, a wife is able to make her husband do everything she wishes," replied the monk.

"Oh!" said the Queen, with a pout, "there is nothing very wonderful in that. Ever since the time of Eve that mystery has been known from generation to generation. What is the second secret?"

"The second imparts wisdom and goodness."

"Well," said the Queen, yawning, "and what is the third?"

"The third," said the monk, "endows the woman who possesses it with matchless beauty, and with the gift of everlasting youth."

"Reverend father," cried the Queen, eagerly, "I should dearly like to know *that* secret."

"Nothing is easier," said the monk. "The only thing you have to do is to allow the sorcerer before he dies, and while he is still at liberty, to hold both your hands in his and to breathe upon your hair three times."

"Let him come," said the Queen; "fetch him at once, reverend father."

"That is impossible," replied the monk. "The King has given strict orders that this man shall not be allowed to enter the palace. It would mean instant death to him to step within these walls. Do not begrudge him the few hours that still remain."

"Unfortunately, reverend father, the King has forbidden me to go out until to-morrow night."

"That is a pity," said the monk. "I see you must give up this wonderful gift. Nevertheless, it would be delightful to remain young, beautiful, and especially to be loved for ever."

"Alas, my father, you are right; the King's

order is extremely unjust. But if I attempted to go out, the sentinels would stop me. You look astonished; that is the way the King treats me occasionally. I am a most miserable wife."

"My heart aches for you, poor woman," said the monk. "What tyranny! But Madam, you should not yield to such unreasonable demands; your duty is to do as you please."

"But how?" asked the Queen.

"There is a way, if you are willing. Get into this sack. I will undertake to carry you out of the palace, even at the risk of my life. And fifty years hence, when you are still as beautiful and as youthful-looking as to-day, you will rejoice that you defied your tyrant."

"I agree," said the Queen; "but are you quite sure that this is no hoax?"

"Madam," said the holy man, raising his arms and beating his breast, "as surely as I am a monk, you have nothing to fear on that score. Besides, I shall remain with you during your interview with this fellow."

"And you will bring me back to the palace?"

"I give you my word of honour I will."

"Knowing the secret?" added the Queen.

"Yes, knowing the secret. But since your Majesty hesitates, we will drop the question; the secret may die with him who discovered it, unless he prefers to tell it to some woman who has more confidence in him."

The only response the Queen made to this was to jump bravely into the bag; the monk drew the cord, lifted the burden on his shoulders, and crossed the courtyard with measured steps. On his way he met the King, who was making his round of inspection.

"You have made a good collection, I see," said the King.

"Sire," replied the monk, "your charity is inexhaustible; I fear I have imposed upon it. Perhaps I should do well to leave this sack and its contents here."

"No, no," said the King. "Take it all, reverend father; it is a good riddance. I do not suppose what you have in it is worth much. Your feast will not be a sumptuous one."

"May your Majesty sup with as good an appetite," replied the monk in a fatherly tone, as he disappeared, muttering something inaudibly. It was probably a Latin prayer.

The supper-bell rang; the King entered the room rubbing his hands. He felt pleased with himself, and the prospect of having his revenge gave him a good appetite.



TAKE IT ALL, REVEREND FATHER."

"Is the Queen not down yet?" he asked, impatiently. "It does not surprise me, though; women are never punctual."

He was about to take his seat, when three soldiers threw open the door, and pushed into the room the little grey man.

"Sire," said one of the guards, "this rascal has had the audacity to enter the palace yard, in spite of the Royal order. We should have hanged him at once rather than disturb your Majesty at supper, but he pretends that he has a message from the Queen, and that he is the bearer of a State secret."

"From the Queen!" exclaimed the King, aghast. "Where is she? Wretch! what have you done with her?"

"I have stolen her!" quietly replied the little man.

"How did you do that?" said the King.

"Sire, who was the monk with a large sack on his back, to whom your Majesty conde-

scended to say, 'Take it all, and a good riddance'?"

"It was you," cried the King; "consequently even I am no longer in safety. One of these days you will steal *me*, and my kingdom into the bargain."

"Sire, I have come to ask you one thing more."

"I am afraid of you," said the King. "Who are you? A sorcerer, or the devil himself?"

"Neither, Sire. I am simply Prince Holar. I was on my way to ask you for the hand of your daughter, when I was overtaken by the storm and obliged to take refuge with my equerry in the house of the pastor of Skalholt. But chance threw in my way a foolish peasant, who has been the cause of my acting in this manner. However, I have only obeyed your Majesty's orders in all this."

"Well, well," said the King, "I see—or rather I do not see; it matters little. Prince Holar, I would rather have you as a son-in-law than as a

neighbour. As soon as the Queen comes back——"

"She is here, Sire; my equerry has conducted her back to the palace."

The Queen soon reappeared, rather ashamed of having been so easily duped, but readily comforted at the prospect of having such a clever man for her son-in-law.

"You must tell me the wonderful secret," she whispered to Prince Holar. "I wish to know it."

"The secret of being beautiful for ever is to be loved," said the Prince.

"How can one be always loved?" asked the Queen.

"By being good, and simple, and by pleasing one's husband."

"Is that all? And you pretend to be a sorcerer!" exclaimed the indignant Queen, throwing up her arms.

"Enough of all this mystery," said the King in alarm. "Prince Holar, you will

have plenty of time to chat with your mother-in-law when you become our son. Come, supper is getting cold. Let us have the whole evening to enjoy ourselves; make the best of your time, my boy, to-morrow you will be married."

Having made this remark, which he thought rather witty, the King glanced at the Queen,

Happy days have no history. We only know that he succeeded his father-in-law and became a powerful ruler. Being something of a liar as well as a thief, bold yet artful, he had all the qualities needful for a conqueror. He took more than a thousand acres of land, which he lost and re-conquered three times, in doing which he



"THE KING STROKED HIS CHIN."

but he received such a look in return that he immediately stroked his chin and contemplated the flies on the ceiling.

Here end the adventures of Prince Holar.

sacrificed six armies. In the celebrated annals of Skalholt and Holar his name figures gloriously. We refer our readers to these famous and most interesting records.