Christmas in the Forest.

A Story for Children. From the German.

THE little house that, like a lamb strayed from the flock, lay far behind the other houses in the village, belonged to Master Andrew. The house as well as the trade had descended through three generations. Andrew was a shoemaker, like his father and grandfather, and on his father's death had married a peasant maiden.

Alas! for Andrew, another shoemaker settled in the village. He had learnt his craft abroad, and was far more skilful than our villager. Andrew's trade departed, and he was glad to gain a scanty livelihood by patching shoes for the peasants.

Want pressed sorely on the little household, especially as there were six little mouths to feed. But poverty did not drive out peace or happiness. The boys and girls grew up strong and rosy. George, the eldest, helped his father, and was quite clever at putting in a patch. Katie assisted her mother. The younger children brought wood from the forest, and were useful in many ways.

Christmas was approaching. The snow lay thick on the ground. In Andrew's house there were no Christmas preparations. Father and son plied their trade by the feeble light of the oil lamp. The girls sat spinning beside their mother. The younger children, in charge of the second boy John, sat round the hearth cracking nuts.

Andrew whistled softly while the mother told the listening children how Christmas was celebrated in the town, of the fair with its thousand attractions and beautifully decorated fir-trees.

Then Andrew exclaimed: "There are

hundreds of firs outside; perhaps the forester will let us cut down some to sell."

The family applauded the idea. Early next morning Andrew sought the forester, and soon returned, bringing the written permission.

"Quick, boys," cried he, "run and ask your cousin the miner to lend us his large hand-sledge."

Away ran George and John. Their father sharpened the large axe whilst the mother prepared the breakfast. The boys quickly returned with the sledge, and, breakfast over, set out with their father for the forest.

Heavily bent the snow-laden branches; still and awesome was the white, silent forest; weirdly rose the old, black tree-trunks from out the white landscape surrounding them; bravely the three toiled through the deep snow.

At length Andrew halted before a spot where stood innumerable dwarf firs that seemed to grow expressly for Christmas-trees. The strokes of an axe were heard and a little tree fell, shaking the snow from its dark green branches. Gleefully the boys placed it in the sledge. A second followed.

"Give me the axe, father; let me try," cried George. His father handed it, and with skilful strokes the boy felled the third tree. "Listen, father," he continued; "there is plenty of work waiting you at home, and very little time to finish it. You go home; I will fell the trees while Jack loads the sledge. When it is full we will return."

His father agreed. "Be careful," said he; "the axe is sharp. And do not overload the sledge!" Then he left them.

"Do not stay late!" he called, looking back.

"Very well, father," cried George, with uplifted axe.

Warmed by their work, the boys heeded neither wind nor snow. The fallen trees breathed forth a fragrant perfume; their ice-bound branches drooped sorrowfully as though grieving to leave their forest home.

Their work ended, the boys harnessed themselves to the sledge and started for home. Just as they regained the tall fir George stopped, exclaiming: "The axe!"

Yes, the axe! It had been left behind. They could not return without that. A moment George hesitated; then he said: "Wait a bit, Jack. I will run back for the axe. I know just where it is."

Away he ran, calling as he went: "Stay with the sledge, Jack."

Jack watched till he was out of sight; then, weariness overpowering him, he sat down on the sledge. Pushing the branches aside, he saw something shine. It was the axe! Seizing it, he ran after his brother, calling: "George! George!" No answer. He turned slowly back and seated himself on the sledge with the axe on his lap.

Meanwhile, George searched anxiously, but found no axe. Darkness crept on, and with heavy heart he returned to the sledge. John was still there, but he had fallen asleep. The axe lay in the snow. George picked it up, then shook his brother, but, to his dismay, Jack would not wake. He half-opened his eyes, muttered some unintelligible words, and then fell back asleep. George let him sleep, and tried to draw the sledge by himself; but it would not stir.

Anguish and terror now overcame the poor boy. What could he do? Where obtain help? He feared Jack would be frozen. Suddenly a light shone in the distance. He ran towards it, and found to his astonishment that it proceeded from the old, ruined castle. He climbed to the window, and the strange sight that greeted him made him for a moment forget his trouble.

In the centre of the hall burned a large fire; over it was a vat-shaped vessel that sent forth spicy odours. All around hundreds of tiny forms were working busily. On one side sat many little men, some sewing garments of glittering tissue, others making beautiful little shoes. And they worked so swiftly. Husch! husch! a coat, cap, or shoe was finished, and flew away to the piles of garments standing beside the little workers.

At the farther end of the hall, cooks were making cakes, which, when baked, they carried two by two on small white boards to a hole in the wall that evidently led to the dwarfs' store-cupboard. Two little men, mounted on stones, stirred the vat with long wands.

"They will certainly enjoy their Christmas," thought George, sniffing the spicy odours.

But a new-comer appeared. He was also a dwarf, but different from the others in dress and appearance. He wore a green hunting-dress made from the wings of earth-beetles; a hat of like colour adorned his head; his hair and beard were long. At his side hung a gold hunting-horn. Majestic he stood amidst the workers, who saluted him respectfully. Raising his eyes, he beheld the intruder, and his glance was one of anger.

George sprang down, but, quick as lightning, the gnome climbed through the opening and stood before the terrified boy. The same moment the fire was extinguished, the

bustle ceased, and the castle stood silent and dark in the snowy forest.

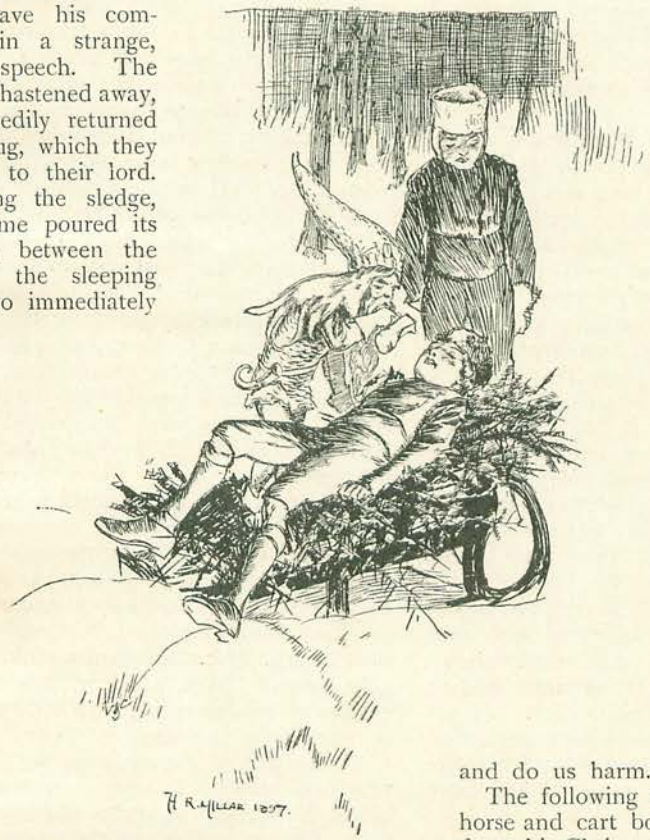
"How dare you spy out our secrets?" cried the angry little man.

George raised his fur cap. "Honoured sir," said he, "I came not to spy, but to implore your aid."

His politeness soothed the enraged gnome; he inquired the cause of distress, and when told, said: "Lead me to the sledge. I will see if I can help you."

George ran quickly forward, followed by the little man, and soon reached the sledge. John still slept. His face and hands were icy cold. In terror George shook him. Raising his horn, the gnome blew a long, shrill blast, and instantly gnomes arose from behind every tree, mound, and bush.

He gave his commands in a strange, lisping speech. The gnomes hastened away, but speedily returned with a jug, which they handed to their lord. Mounting the sledge, the gnome poured its contents between the lips of the sleeping boy, who immediately awoke, and stared wonderingly at the strange company.



"THE GNOME POURED ITS CONTENTS BETWEEN THE LIPS OF THE SLEEPING BOY."

George quickly explained what had happened, adding that he owed his life to the gnome's kind care. John thanked the little man, and declared he never felt better in his life.

Then the gnome questioned them about their family, and learning that they would have no Christmas rejoicings, bade them bring their brothers and sisters to the old castle and join the gnomes' Christmas feast.

The boys joyfully agreed and, thanking him for his kind invitation, turned to depart.

"Stay," said the gnome; "mount the sledge and hold each other tight!" He then ordered his servants to drag them to the last tall fir. The boys mounted. A hundred gnomes harnessed themselves to the sledge, and away they went, swift as the wind. That was a ride! They had barely started ere their father's house was in sight; the sledge stopped, and the gnomes vanished. As they clambered down their father came towards them.

"How could you stay so late?" he asked. "Your mother is very anxious and vexed that I left you."

They entered the cottage. Supper was ready, but they could eat nothing until they had related their strange adventure. Their father shook his head.

"Yes, yes," said he, "I knew the gnomes haunted the old castle, but I have never seen them; still, George is a Sunday child, and might well see things that are hidden from others."

"Of course, they must go," said the mother, "or the little people will be angry and do us harm."

The following morning Andrew, with a horse and cart borrowed from the miner, drove his Christmas-trees to the town. All the children ran out to see the cart loaded, and when it drove away they followed. Passing through the village, other children joined them, forming quite a procession.

At the end of the village Andrew stopped, saying, "Run back to school now, children; and you, George, make haste with your

mending." The little crowd turned back, and the cart with its green burden went briskly forward.

Reaching home, George worked industriously for some hours. Then shouts and laughter attracted him. He looked out. Beneath the tall fir the school-children were heaping up the snow.

"Ah, a snow-man!" he exclaimed. "I must help!" Away flew the boot with its half-finished patch, and away sped the little cobbler to join the laughing throng. Merry were the workers and loud their shouts as George, mounted on his shoemaker's stool, placed the snow-man's head upon his shoulders; and there the giant stood, tall and threatening as a winter god.

Then the children joined hands and danced round him, singing merrily, heedless of the icy blast that blew sharply against their laughing faces. Soon George returned to work; the others ran back to school, and his frozen Majesty stood solitary and forsaken.

When the moon rose behind the forest, bathing the snow-clad world in her silver light, George's boot had long been finished, the shoemaker slept beside his sleeping family, and in the box with the Sunday clothes lay a little leather purse filled with silver coins that he had brought back from the town.

The longed-for night arrived, and at the first blast of the golden horn that was to summon them to the feast, the children, dressed in their Sunday clothes, hastened to the forest.

Beneath the tall fir they paused in amaze. The snow-man reared his hoary head on high. But on his arms and shoulders, and on every branch of the fir, sat the gnomes who had come to guide their little guests through the forest.

Climbing swiftly down, they tripped lightly before the children. Gaily the girls' red frocks fluttered above the white snow; merrily the silvery laugh of the children rang through the silent forest.

When they reached the castle it was ablaze with light, whilst all around the tall firs, like giant Christmas-trees, were bright with various coloured stars.

They crossed the threshold to the sound of a million tinkling bells. Within all was light and glittering splendour. The ground and walls were covered with soft green moss, spangled with violets cut from amethysts and sapphires, whilst the carnations and snowdrops glistening between were cut from rubies and pearls, their tiny leaves shedding forth rays of dazzling light. A large sun, formed of carbuncles and diamonds, shed over all a light brighter than day. The children believed it a real sun and the flowers real flowers. Beneath stood a gigantic fir, its topmost branches almost touching the sun, and seeming every moment as though they would burst into flames. Showers of sparks fell from the sun and, resting like stars on every needle-pointed leaf, there sparkled and glittered.

On the branches hung every imaginable fruit, from the tiniest berries to the golden pineapple, all made and moulded with exquisite skill of sugar-pastry; no confectioner could have fashioned them more beautifully than had the little fingers of the gnome-cooks. All around fluttered butterflies, dragon-flies, and cockchafers, whom the gnomes had woke from their winter sleep, and who, placed in this beauteous garden, believed that spring had really come, and dived into the petals of the glittering flowers or stole the sweetness from the sugar fruits.

The children moved about on the tips of their toes, holding each other's hands, and murmuring, "How beautiful! Oh, how beautiful!" Their guides had departed, and save for the butterflies and cockchafers they were alone. The stillness and splendour almost took away their breath.

Strains of sweet music broke the silence; nearer and nearer it came, louder and louder it swelled, as, two by two, a train of little musicians in glittering doublets, blowing and fiddling on tiny instruments, passed through a slit in the wall and formed a circle round the tree.

Little men with long beards followed, and after them came the King, in whom George recognised his friend with the golden horn. Beside him walked the Queen, closely veiled. Both wore gold mantles ornamented with precious stones, and had crowns of flame on their heads. Next came many old men in gold robes. These wore red caps, and were evidently ministers of state, they looked so grave and thoughtful.

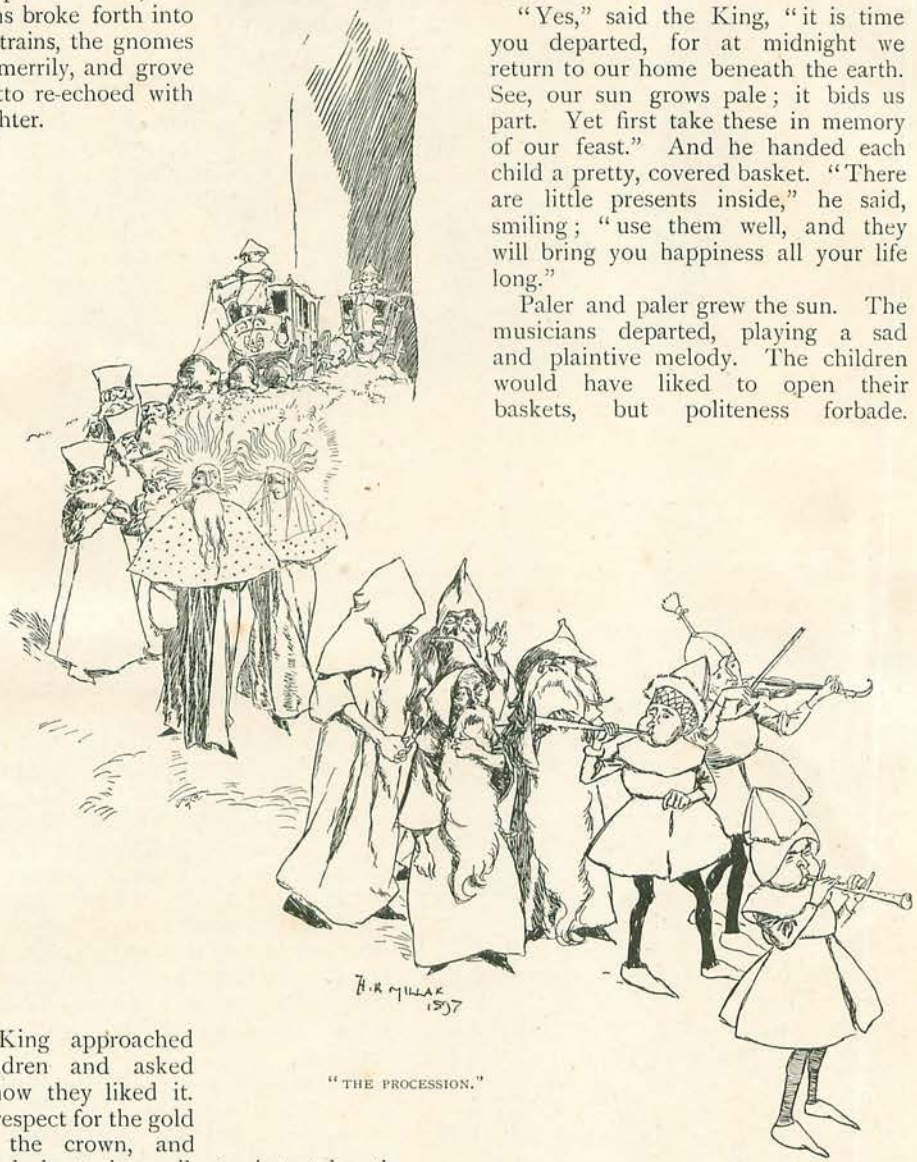
Then followed shining carriages drawn by rats and moles. In these sat the gnome ladies, all veiled. A gnome coachman sat on each carriage, and a gnome footman stood behind.

The King and Queen ascended a mossy eminence, on which stood two gold thrones. The ladies alighted from their carriages, which drove slowly away.

Then the King made a long speech. The children could not understand a word, but it

must have been very touching, for many of the ladies, and even the beautiful little Queen, wept with emotion.

The speech ended, the musicians broke forth into joyous strains, the gnomes sported merrily, and grove and grotto re-echoed with gay laughter.



"THE PROCESSION."

The King approached the children and asked kindly how they liked it. At first, respect for the gold mantle, the crown, and the speech, kept them silent; but at length George stammered forth: "It is beautiful above measure, beautiful as Heaven!"

Meanwhile the cooks ran about, carrying beautiful cakes and goblets of rosy wine. The gnomes did ample justice to the fare. The children enjoyed it xceedingly, although the bites and sups were very small. The dwarfs then climbed the Christmas-tree and threw the fruit to the ladies. This caused much merriment. The children had their share, and when they could eat no more the King made them fill all their pockets.

At length, being tired, they wished to return home.

"Yes," said the King, "it is time you departed, for at midnight we return to our home beneath the earth. See, our sun grows pale; it bids us part. Yet first take these in memory of our feast." And he handed each child a pretty, covered basket. "There are little presents inside," he said, smiling; "use them well, and they will bring you happiness all your life long."

Paler and paler grew the sun. The musicians departed, playing a sad and plaintive melody. The children would have liked to open their baskets, but politeness forbade. Instead, they thanked the King for his kindness, wished him good-night, and were led by him from the castle.

As they crossed the threshold their father stepped from behind the trees. He had waited there the whole time, and tried on all sides to enter the castle, but in vain. His anxiety had grown intense, and he rejoiced

"HE HANDED EACH CHILD A PRETTY, COVERED BASKET."

to see them return in safety. Taking the two youngest children in his arms, he hastened home, followed by the others.

On their way they told of all the music and splendour, and their father marvelled, for he had heard no music and seen no light. To his eyes the castle and the forest trees were black and gloomy as heretofore. But thus it is ever. The older folk gaze into the world with troubled eyes, and thus see only darkness and gloom, where to the children's eyes all is light, happiness, and joy.

In the baskets a fresh surprise awaited them. They contained neither gold nor precious stones, only pretty little tools, dainty, and bright as playthings. George and Paul each received every requisite for a shoemaker's trade. John and Karl a tailor's scissors, needle, and thimble. Katie and Christel had each a spinning-wheel.

The children laughed at the droll little presents, but their parents understood the deeper meaning that lay hidden beneath the apparent pleasantry, for they knew that the gnome is a friend to the industrious worker, and makes his work to prosper.

Years passed. A stately mansion with cowshed and pigsty replaced the shoemaker's cottage. Andrew and his wife were the richest people in the village.

This they owed to their children's industry, or rather to the gnome's presents, for the brothers and sisters always used the tools the King had given them. George and Paul were celebrated shoemakers, and did work enough for four; John and Karl were first-class tailors; whilst Katie and Christel were famed throughout the land for their beautiful spinning.

The villagers said Andrew must have found a treasure whilst taking his Christmas-trees to market; but the shoemaker and his family knew better, and when seated in their new mansion they often spoke with grateful remembrance of the "Gnome's Christmas Feast."