

A STORY FOR CHILDREN. TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN.



ANY years ago, there lived a poor peasant with his two daughters. Now, it so happened that the eldest girl, Martha, took a violent dislike to her younger sister, Natalia, who was by far the sweeter, prettier, and nicer of the two.

As years passed, Martha's dislike and jealousy of her sister increased, as she found that Natalia was the favourite everywhere and was greatly sought after by all the young men in the village. Martha tried everything in her power to make life a burden to Natalia: she made her do all the hard work in the hut, and worried and snubbed her as much as she possibly could, and did her best to try and set everyone against her. But Natalia did not mind: she became daily more beautiful and more sweet tempered, and did the hard work good-naturedly and without a single word of complaint. This annoyed Martha immensely, and she was beside herself with rage and disappointment to find that, in spite of all this bad treatment, Natalia continued more and more amiable and attractive and seemed perfectly contented with her lot.

The father did not trouble himself much about the girls: he was either out trying to get work or else asleep on the stove.

One day while Martha was out picking wild strawberries in the forest she was somewhat startled at meeting a horrid little demon, who grinned at her.

"You need not be frightened," said the Imp; "I am quite harmless. Besides, you and I are friends—I would not hurt you; in fact, I am here to help you to get rid of your sister. I know you hate her; so do I, and I would gladly do anything to rid you and the world in general of such a plague."

Martha was greatly relieved at this.

"How do you propose to help me?" she asked.

"Well, you send your sister round to me on some excuse or other, and that is all you need do in the matter; I will manage the rest."

"But where is she to find you?"

"I have a wonderful emporium in the middle of the forest where you can get anything you like, from a kopek's worth of sun-flower seed* to a leg of mutton."

* Sunflower seeds are supposed to be good for the complexion, and are consequently very freely eaten by the peasantry.

"Very well," said Martha, "I will send her at once"; and, so saying, she hastily returned home.

The moment the wicked girl got back to the hut she hid all the matches, as well as every particle of candle, and blew out the holy oil which was burning before the ikon (or sacred picture) in the corner. As night closed in she rushed off to find her sister. "Natalia! Natalia! what shall I do? I have forgotten to bring in any candles or matches, and it is growing dark; and, worse than all, the lamp in front of the ikon has gone out, and I cannot light it again. Something terrible is sure to happen to us if we do not light the lamp at once. Rush off, like a good girl, to the forest and get some candles and matches; there is a friend of mine who has a large supply of all sorts of necessaries, and he will let you have whatever you want without payment."

"But won't some of our neighbours lend you a match?"

"Go and do as I tell you, you disagreeable little thing! You never will do anything

you are asked without making a fuss," yelled Martha, in a fury.

That was enough for Natalia. She stopped to hear no more, but rushed straight off into the forest. It was almost dark now, and she could hardly find her way. She was not a bit frightened; she was only anxious to get the things her sister required as quickly as possible.

At last, after having walked some distance, everything about her suddenly became quite light, and she saw in front of her a curious-looking house, and over the door was a

death's head, which was lighted up inside and sent forth rays of brilliant light from its eyes, nose, and mouth, illuminating the whole forest for some distance round.

This was so unexpected and horrible that poor Natalia began to feel alarmed, and in all probability would have run away had not the door opened and the horrid little Imp appeared.

"Oh, here you are, at last!" said he, with a ghastly grin. "I began to think you were not going to turn up."

"What! did you expect me, then?" gasped the terrified Natalia.

"Of course! This illumination is entirely in your honour. I don't usually waste so much light—I can see in the dark."

"You must have made some mistake," Natalia said, "as it was quite by accident that I came here. My sister sent me to get some candles and matches from some place near here, kept by a friend of hers."

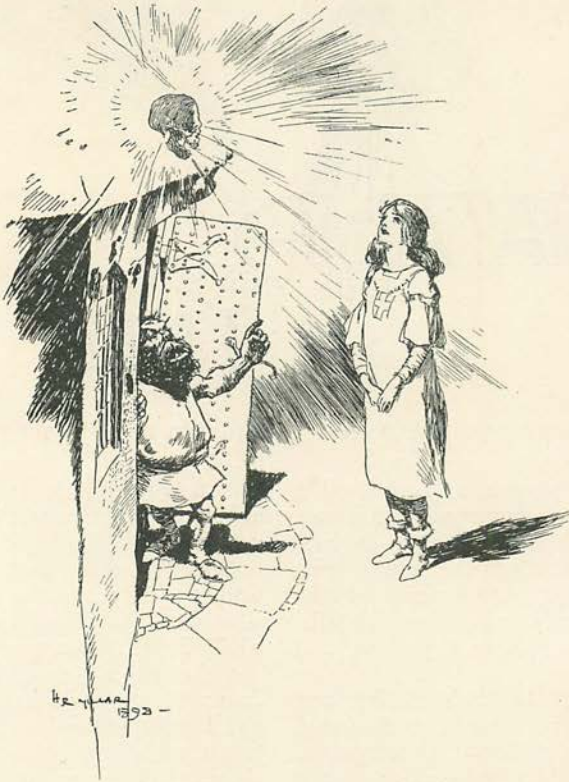
"I know all about that—I am the friend in question; this noble mansion is the grand emporium of every-

thing, and you have made no mistake."

"Then, if you please, will you kindly let me have the candles and matches, as my sister is waiting for them, and is all in the dark?"

"Let her wait!" grinned the Imp; "I don't part with my lights so easily. You will have to come and attend to my emporium and tidy up things for me before I let you go again, and if you don't do as I tell you you won't see any other light but mine for the rest of your blessed little life."

"I am really very sorry, but I must run



"THE HORRID LITTLE IMP APPEARED."

off. Can't you let me have just one candle and a match for to-night, as my sister is anxiously waiting for me to bring them?"

Here the Imp indulged in a loud laugh, which jarred on Natalia's nerves.

"Come, girl," said he, "don't stand there idle; go in and tidy up the place, and get me my dinner ready."

There was no help for it. Natalia was obliged to follow the creature into the long, low building. On looking round, she found it full of every imaginable article of food, clothing, furniture, kitchen utensils, etc., and all in a hopeless muddle, and everything just where it had no possible business to be!

"This place is not tidy by any means," said the Imp; "you will have to set to work and put things straight by to-morrow morning. But first of all I want my meal; so run away and find what you think I should like, and cook it properly. I shall expect it ready in ten minutes."

With these words the Imp opened a small door leading into a kitchen, pushed Natalia in, and locked her up alone. The poor girl looked round, but saw nothing either in the shape of food or cooking utensils. She hunted high and low, but in vain; at last she sat down on the floor and cried.

Presently she heard a very slight flapping of wings, and, on glancing up, she saw a little white dove, which flew down towards her and perched upon her shoulder.

"Don't cry, Natalia," said the bird; "there is no occasion for you to fear. You have always been a good girl, unselfish to a degree, and cheerful under most trying circumstances: therefore no harm will ever overtake you. I will be near to protect you; for I never fail to help and protect all those who deserve it. Whatever the Imp, who is the greatest enemy I have, tells you to do, try and do it, no matter how difficult; I will always be near—only never despair, but persevere and have patience."

The dove then left Natalia's shoulder and began fluttering round the room. Natalia watched the little thing eagerly; all her fear had left her, and a feeling of perfect calm came over her.

Suddenly, what was her surprise when right in front of her appeared a table upon which a sumptuous repast was daintily displayed! Everything that anyone could possibly wish to eat and drink was upon the table.

"Oh, you dear, sweet little dove! how can I ever thank you?" exclaimed Natalia, but the bird had disappeared, and in another moment the door opened and the Imp walked in.

"Well!" he cried, "I trust you have obeyed my orders and prepared my dinner."

Just as Natalia was about to reply the creature caught sight of all the good things and flew into a terrible rage.

"What is the meaning of this?" he cried. "Where did you get these things from? Answer me this instant."

"I am very sorry," replied Natalia, calmly, "but you told me to prepare your dinner, and—here it is."

"None of your insolence! How dare you speak to me like that? Be off with you! and put the emporium in order—that won't be so easy—and if you don't put it straight by the morning, I will make mincemeat of you!"

"There is no pleasing some people!" thought Natalia, as she was roughly turned out of the kitchen.

The Imp had been correct in saying that it would be no easy matter to put the emporium to rights. The instant Natalia put a thing into its place it rolled out again and hid itself away in some obscure corner of the room, and it took Natalia quite half an hour to find it, and then with no better result. This sort of thing went on half through the night, until, tired out and weary, Natalia decided to rest a little and try again later on. So she lay down upon the counter and instantly fell asleep; nor did she wake up again until she heard the door handle rattle and found that it was morning; and the Imp walked in to see if all was tidy! She jumped up and looked round in alarm, but what was her surprise and delight to see that everything was in perfect order and as neat as possible.

"That dear little dove!" thought Natalia; "how good of it to help me!"

The Imp was beside himself with rage. "What is the meaning of all this?" he cried. "Tell me this instant who it was that helped you, for you could not have done the work alone."

"I don't know who it was," Natalia replied, "but a dove flew upon my shoulder last night and promised to protect me and help me; more than that I do not know."

"That's a lie!" stormed the Imp; "doves, or any birds for the matter of that, don't fly about helping people! I never heard such rubbish in all my life! Tell me instantly who helped you?"

"What I told you is perfectly true, and if you won't believe me I cannot help it."

The Imp glared at the girl for a moment, evidently wondering what he could do next.



"THE CREATURE FLEW INTO A TERRIBLE RAGE."

"I shall be even with you yet," he said at last; "you told me your sister wanted candles and matches. I am out of them; but this evening you can have the magic skull over my door—that will give you light for the rest of your lives and illuminate the whole village besides, provided you ever reach it in safety, for the fiery skull is no easy thing to carry. Take it and see whether any goose of a bird will help you to carry it." The Imp clapped his hands and laughed in delight at what he considered an excellent joke.

Natalia trembled at the thought of possessing so horrid a thing as the magic skull; but there was no help for it—she knew she would have to make the best of it and trust to the little dove for help.

At the close of the day, the Imp climbed up a ladder and, after some difficulty, contrived to bring down the skull, which he gave to Natalia.

"Take it," said he, "and give it to your sister with my compliments, though I doubt if you will ever get as far as the village alive. In less than ten minutes you ought to be a heap of ashes. Farewell!"

The Imp laughed loudly and re-entered the house, leaving Natalia to return to the village with the skull in her hand.

It was beginning to grow dark now, and she had not gone far into the forest before the skull began to send forth rays of light all round. For some time nothing happened, but presently the rays became so fierce that they began to scorch her hand, and at last she

was obliged to drop the horrid thing altogether, as the heat from it was too intense to bear; but even after she had let it drop the rays from the skull scorched the trees and grass and everything that was within reach. Natalia tried to run away, but the dreadful rays followed her and scorched her whenever she attempted to go; when she remained quiet they hardly touched her.

"Whatever shall I do?" cried Natalia; "I can't stay here for ever, and I can't carry the horrid thing."

"Don't be frightened," said a voice, and once more Natalia saw her friend the dove: "take up the skull again and carry it home; I shall sit on your shoulder, so that the rays won't dare to hurt you while I am with you."

Natalia quickly obeyed. She hardly felt any heat at all as she walked along carrying the skull.

"Why may I not leave this horrid thing in the forest?" asked Natalia of the dove; "what use is it to me?"

"It will prove of the greatest use, my child; keep it, for it cannot hurt you now, as its power for evil depends much upon the influence to which it is subjected. It will rid you of your enemies and help you in many ways. Do you know that ever since

to rest until she was safely inside the hut. Her sister embraced her warmly and wept bitterly over her, begging her to forgive her cruelty; while the father was beside himself with joy.

After that all went well in the village. As for the peasant and his daughters, a wonderful change came over their prospects; for the magic skull, instead of sending forth rays of



"IT WILL HELP YOU IN MANY WAYS."

you left home the village has been in utter darkness and the inhabitants have been almost starving, for every morsel of food has disappeared; the wretched Imp spirited it all away into his emporium!"

"And are my father and sister starving too?"

"Yes; they have been very miserable, particularly your sister, who never ceased lamenting sending you away to the forest."

Natalia hurried on faster and never stopped

fierce light, shot forth gold whenever Natalia required it! Consequently the peasant and his daughters were poor no longer; they moved out of the little hut into a large house, and Natalia spent all her time in helping her poorer neighbours.

For some time all went well, until Martha again developed a great dislike and jealousy towards her sister. She was annoyed because the magic skull paid no attention to her: whenever she wanted gold it only

sent forth fire and burnt her ; and she hated having to ask her sister for whatever money she required.

"Why," thought she, "should I not try and secure a skull from the Imp for my own use?"

So one day she set out to visit the emporium in the forest, but whether she found what she required no one ever knew, for she was never seen or heard of after. Natalia and her father had the forest searched and left no stone unturned to find Martha, but all in vain.

One morning, as Natalia was sitting by her window weeping over Martha's strange disappearance, she was delighted to see her friend the dove fly in and perch itself on the sill.

"Dear little dove," cried Natalia, "cannot you tell me where my sister is?"

"She has met with the fate that she had destined for you. I tried to help her, but she only laughed at me, and would not obey

me or trust in me. The Imp has had his revenge ; he will never get over your reaching home in safety with the skull."

Natalia was miserable, and for days nothing would comfort her.

"Natalia," said the dove, appearing to her again one day, "will you marry me?"

To say that Natalia was astonished would be to put it very mildly.

"Who then are you? I thought you were a dove?"

"No ; I only assumed that form to help you. I am the son of the Queen of the Fairies."

So saying the dove instantly changed itself into a remarkably handsome young Prince : so charming was he that Natalia directly fell desperately in love with him, and promised to marry him on the following day, which she accordingly did and lived happily ever after ; Natalia becoming as great a favourite with the fairies as she was with the mortals.

