

Modern German Fairy Stories
Florence Dresser

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The Sleep Queen
by
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Little Fred lay in bed, but he could not go to sleep. That was quite unusual. At other times after his mother had prayed with him he had scarcely time to say, "Amen - Good Night. Sleep well," all in one breath - then he was already asleep. But today it was otherwise. Restlessly he threw himself here and there; it seemed to be uncomfortable ~~every~~ where, he believed it was in his heart but it was in his stomach, there lay twelve separate and distinct baked potatoes which pressed down like a heavy stone. At first Fred found it quite interesting to lay awake a little longer - then one had time to recall all sorts of things. It was certainly important enough to plan concerning where the great Indian fight which he had agreed upon with the boys of his class should be fought on the morrow.

And then whether he should after all give Hans the long piece of twine, the flint

and the old pocket knife for the yellow spotted salamander. That should be considered. The pocket knife, to be sure, had only one blade and that was full of nicks, and the twine was knotted together, but after all—Then suddenly came an unpleasant thought; the arithmetic recitation tomorrow at school came to him, he still had two problems to do.

No, now it became tedious, now he did not want to consider any longer, but sleep. If he closes his eyes right tight he must succeed. But that does not help either. In the little bed opposite his, he heard the low, regular breathing of his little brother, while he burrowed his head in the pillow, more and more restlessly. Now he wished to make yet one last attempt and swear too, as he did so. He ground his teeth as he had heard the drunken cobbler, who lived in a cellar do and uttered a wild, "potolók i póll," many times one after another. That was Russian and a terrible

curse.

For Fred had made friends with a Russian teacher of languages who lived upstairs, had begged him earnestly, to teach him a round Russian oath, with which he wanted to impress his school mates. So the Russian had taught him to say, "Potolók i póll," and to roll his eyes properly as he said it, and now Fred believed that he could swear like the wildest Cassock and was very proud of it.

Of course it had not occurred to the good Russian to teach a little boy to swear, for he knew that it was not right, "potolók i póll," were three harmless words and meant, "ceiling and floor," but Fred did not suspect this, he found that it sounded horribly fine.

When now even his beloved Cassock curse, did not bring sleep to him, Fred gave a soft sigh of despair, and if it had not been too great a disgrace for a ten year

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old boy, he would have cried. The tears already were in his throat and were rising to his eyes, but no! they should not trickle down. So he opened his eyes wide and turned them staring to the opposite wall.

The faint light of the night lamp, which burned on account of his little brother, fell straight on a picture which hung there, and which Fred loved very much. It represented a part of a beautiful green forest, on whose mossy ground, the most magnificent, gaily colored flowers grew, tall foxgloves and proud yellow shepherds' clubs. But the greatest beauty of the picture was, that, under a great fire-red mushroom, sat a little man, comfortably as though under an umbrella. He wore a closed doublet and a gray mantle, the peaked cap of which covered his head, and a long white beard that almost hung down to the ground. That was a true forest sprite, just as they must be.

Fred knew that well.

But what's that! what was going on there?! Fred opened his eyes still wider, so he could see better, no, it was really so - the place under the mushroom was empty. The forest sprite had disappeared.

Fred had not recovered from his astonishment when something touched him on the arm and truly, there sat the little gray man out of the picture, on the edge of his bed. Yet his eyes did not look jolly and friendly as they always had done, but they looked at Fred half angrily, half sorrowfully.

"Yes," said the dwarf with a delicate voice, "and you are still wondering that she does not come to you today? Don't you know then, that she does not come at all, to ill bred children."

"I am not ill bred," Fred answered proudly but he did not feel good about it, and his heart beat loudly. "You can't fool me!" the

other went on undaunted, "I know all about it, Twelve potatoes and a bad conscience. Oh, that must be depressing, I am glad I am not you. Why did you lie to your good mother?" "She asked - and then I said - and then," spluttered Fred confused.

"Yes, she asked you yesterday evening how many baked potatoes you had already eaten, and you said, 'five,' and it was really ten, and then she gave you two more. Isn't that so?"

"But," Fred wanted to excuse himself, however the little gray fellow cut his words short.

"You are a rude youth," he said harshly, "and for that reason she has not come to you today."

"Who do you mean?" asked Fred more inquisitive than repentant.

"Who other than the Sleep Queen," growled the forest sprite.

"The Sleep Queen?" Fred opened his eyes wide

and looked very stupid.

"That you have been very rude is so much the more a pity as this very day I had thought of something pretty for you," the other went on, "now of course it won't do." He showed an anxious face. "We have known each other so many years, you and I, and we have been so contented together, that I can almost say we are friends." (Fred nodded silently) "Then I had thought it would amuse you to come with me, when I visited the Sleep Queen - Its too bad."

"Do you know her?" Fred asked with consuming interest.

"Of course," answered the forest spirit proudly and stroked his long white beard. "I am even distantly related to her, through the Forest-king who had married the Fairy-flower, but that is too long a story to explain it to you now."

"Does she live far from here?" inquired Fred breathlessly.

"Very far, but that does not matter. Only the fact that you have been naughty, makes the thing impossible. For you can readily imagine that such a high personality - as the Sleep Queen will have nothing to do with youths who lie to their mothers, so that they can get twelve baked potatoes to eat."

"Take me with you! Take me with you," begged Fred with glowing cheeks. "I will give you a beautiful pocket knife, an awfully long piece of twine and a flint that sends forth magnificent sparks, for I care more for the Sleep Queen than John does for his old salamander." That the twine was tied together in many places, the knife was nicked, and one was often obliged to strike the flint for half an hour before the sparks came, he prudently kept secret. The little gray man did not answer he seemed to be sunk in thought.

"I would be glad to do you the favor," he finally said good naturedly, "but only under one condition; namely that you promise me,

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solemnly and truly to tell your mother yourself
that you have lied and that you will never
do it again and—

But Fred was already sitting upright in bed and
with a serious face said slowly and earnestly:
"By the heavens I swear it, without any trick or
delusion!" With that he held both fists close under
the nose of the wood sprite in such a way
that he could see that the thumbs stood
up stiff. If they had been doubled up the
entire oath of course would have been of no
avail. Every school boy knows that.

But whether it was too long since the
school days of the old fellow for him to
know the exact answer in such matters or
whether some other consideration occurred to
him, at all events he shook his back and
forth as though he was not entirely convinced
and asked doubtfully, "Are you really in earnest?"

Then Fred went to the extreme, "I swear it, potolók
i piál," he cried with rolling eyes.

"I do not understand that," said the forest sprite.

"I certainly believe you," said Fred triumphantly.

"That is Russian and a frightful oath. Who promises by that and then does not hold to it, some quite terrible thing happens to him."

"Then it is enough," the forest sprite who knew no more Russian than Fred did, said earnestly. "Now come."

Fred did not let him say it a second time for, beaming with joy, he reached after his stockings, in order to dress himself quickly.

However the little gray fellow prevented him. "That is not necessary," said he, "I will take you under my mantle."

Fred had to laugh at the thought that the tiny little mantle of the little fellow should cover him the great Fred, but before he suspected it something dark flew over his head, and covered the entire youth, so that he could neither see nor move. Then it seemed to him as though he was carried through the air far far distant, a long long time.

Phew! now finally he stood on his feet again. That gave a big jerk, just as a few days before, when in his sleep he had fallen out of his bed. Yet when he could look around again, he was no longer in his sleeping room, but in the midst of a wonderful forest and it was not night but bright day, in fact it was already towards evening, for the descending sun gleamed bright red through the trees.

Fred did not wonder in the least at this sudden transformation; since he had found the little gray man of the picture standing on the edge of his bed, he did not wonder at anything more. And he was right in that.

He only looked about much pleased and inquisitive, and suddenly the forest became remarkably familiar to him. Truly there were, indeed, the high yellow mulleins, the magnificent fox gloves with the many red bells and the bright light mushrooms of the picture at home. And beside him stood his old friend the forest-sprite, looking joyously at him.

"Now we are in my home," he said, "here rules the forest king who is a sort of a cousin. Is it not true that it is very beautiful here?"

"Fine," cried Fred delighted, and sprang after a squirrel that was running quickly across the road. Yet it did not run away but allowed Fred to take it, and seated himself trustingly on his shoulder. In the underwood there was a rustling; a slender roe stepped forth and licked Fred's hand softly, and a mighty stag with splendid horns, stepped to his side and looked at him pleasantly. The evening wind whispered low in the tree tops.

He stepped along on the ~~green~~ moss and many other little gray men met them all of whom looked like Fred's forest spirits. The latter nodded to his country men joyously and begged them to greet the forest king for him. He himself would come afterwards, only he must first conduct Fred to the Sleep-Queen, he had promised that.

Then Fred declared, he no longer cared so much about that for it could not be

any more beautiful anywhere than it was here, and he would be content to remain here! At all events he had long wished for a squirrel and a roe.

But the forest sprite said that would not do, because he was already announced to the Sleep Queen, took Fred by the hand and drew him away with him. As he walked he broke from a lofty fir tree a piece of rosin, which he put in his pocket.

"Now we come immediately to the kingdom of the flower fairy", he related, "here is the boundary, but we are permitted to go over this without pass port or custom duties because the Fairy Flower is married to the Forest King so it's all one kingdom". "Back of this then lies the land of the Sleep Queen; to that too we come unmolested, since the Fairy Flower and the Sleep Queen are distantly related with one another, through the red Poppy Flower elf and are not so particular, especially if I lead you!" he drew his little figure up proudly.

The forest became lighted and surrounded by the fiery light of the setting sun, they wandered

through the splendid gardens in which the Flower Fairy lived. Everywhere waved wonderfully beautiful, magnificently colored, giant flowers, on slender stalks, and in their calyxes sat the loveliest flower elves, playing on little golden harps, and singing soft sweet songs.

"That sounds almost as beautiful as when my mother sings to my little brother in the evening," "hum, hum, the sandman comes," but I believe my mother sings still better said Fred and folded his hands involuntarily as though he was about to say his evening prayer.

The farther they went the nearer they came to the boundary of the kingdom of the Sleep Queen, that much softer and wearier became the song of the elves and the calyxes of the flowers closed; it was as if everything wished to go to sleep.

And then they were in the kingdom of the Sleep Queen, just as the gleam of the golden sun disappeared back of the horizon, like a glistening little spark and soft gray evening

shadows spread out. A great wonderful rest and stillness lay over everything.

Carefully the little man led Fred through a broad field of long-stemmed flowers whose fiery red still seemed to shine in the twilight.

"Those are poppies," said Fred quite proud of his knowledge, "we have those in our garden also. Only they are not so large and do not smell so strong as here."

The little forest sprite quickly drew out of his pocket, the fragrant piece of resin, which he had broken off in the forest, and gave it to Fred.

"Smell that," he warned, "otherwise the odor here will be too strong for you and you will go to sleep."

Higher and higher, like glorious slender pillars, the stalks of the poppy flowers stood up in the air; they climbed about one another and formed flowering walls and spires and when one had looked closely, then he noticed, that it was a wonderful castle, beautiful beyond all measure.

In it the Sleep Queen lay and slept. She rested on soft, dark pillows, which the night fairy, with whom she was very good friends had embroidered all over with golden stars, and her long black hair was spread like a royal mantle about her.

Oh, she was beautiful! Her sweet lovely face was white as snow, only the lips gleamed burning red and the black eyelashes lay like fine drawn shadows on her cheeks. Her breast rose and fell regularly, she breathed low and quietly.

About the couch of the Sleep Queen lay like a guard the drollest little marmots, in deep sleep.

The forest sprite stood wonderingly and respectfully before his beautiful sleeping friend. But Fred became tired of the matter, he had thought the Sleep Queen would be more amusing.

"The sun had only just gone down and she is already asleep!" he thought almost disdainfully just as my little brother does.

at home.

The forest sprite wrinkled his forehead and looked at him sternly.

"Don't you know that all people that have to work at night, sleep during the day, so that they may get new strength? Just think of the baker back of your house or the night watchman who lives opposite you."

"Yes," said Fred, "but I thought—"

Just then the first star appeared in the dusky sky. In a moment all the marmots were suddenly on their legs and rubbed the sleep from their eyes with their little paws. That looked so droll that Fred had to laugh out loud.

Then the Sleep Queen opened her wonderful eyes, which were dark as night, raised up and looked kindly at Fred.

"Good day," said Fred although he really should have said, "Good night" and extended his hand loyally to her. However she did not take it but simply nodded to him. "If I touch you, you will sleep and we wish to become acquainted a little first, for till now

I have only seen you in sleep. But your friend, the forest sprite has told me much about you.

"Yes," the forest sprite interrupted, "and the visit almost missed taking place today, for" - and he was just on the point of telling the story of the twelve baked potatoes.

However Fred, who had become a glowing red, interrupted him.

"But I have sworn by potolok I will not to do it again," he asserted eagerly.

Then the forest sprite was satisfied and also the Sleep Queen said indulgently, "I know, I know," and did not investigate the subject. She did not like to make any unnecessary words.

Now she lifted herself from her couch, stretched her wonderfully beautiful white arms a little, and shook her long waving dark gown, that had acquired a few folds from lying. After she had yawned stealthily a few times, which was very becoming to her, she said, "It is high time to go to work, for I have much to do,

Some one bring me my wings."

A few of the larger marmots, hurried away eager to serve

"Fred may accompany me tonight," decided the Sleep Queen, "And you?" she turned to the forest sprite

But he thanked her and declined; saying he must go to his cousin, the forest king; to whose smallest child he should stand as god-father, and then he wanted to inquire, what was wished for a christening gift.

Now the marmots came dragging along a pair of mighty coal-black wings, which the Sleep Queen fastened to her shoulders.

"By day when I sleep I always lay them off," she explained for they press on me when I am lying down. — "My Crown," she commanded again, and there was brought to her on a golden plate, a crown of bright red poppies, which she placed on her head. Then she pressed a great bouquet of poppies in her arm, took ^{the} two baskets with the good and ^{the} bad dreams in her hand, and now she was ready.

The marmots had placed themselves in row like a guard of honor, in a quite military manner they came to "present arms," with poppy flower caps, as with rifles, and whistled a farewell march.

"Fare thee well," the Sleep Queen said to the forest sprite, and with a silent flap of the wings, rose into the air.

And suddenly, without knowing how it happened, Fred was on the mighty wings of an immense owl, that flew with him behind the Sleep Queen. Whee! That whistled through the air! It had already become quite dark, so that one could not see anything now; only the eyes of the owl shone through the darkness. But Fred was not afraid; he threw his arm about the neck of the owl, and held fast, and there came to him a picture in his story book at home; how little Tom Thumb flew through the air on the back of a swallow. How strange that he, large Fred, must now experience the same thing as little Tom Thumb! Indeed wonderful

things came to pass in the world!

Finally a bright light appeared beneath them, and when they came nearer, it was a great, great city, in which many lanterns burned on the streets, notwithstanding the fact that it was already very late. And they flew to the most beautiful house, that lay in the center of the city, a magnificent castle.

The Sleep Queen seated herself lightly on the window-sill, and looked in the lighted room, and Fred ventured also to look in.

Inside sat a tall proud man, dressed in purple and ermine, a glittering crown on his head, and scepter and royal emblem beside him on the table. He looked earnest and kind and was still eagerly employed with business of state.

"The emperor," whispered Fred, breathlessly and the Sleep Queen nodded.

"I always go to him first," she said low, "not because he is my most distinguished client, no, I love all good people equally,

high and low, but because he has the greatest need of me, for the welfare and the voice of many thousands, rest on his heart. Do you believe that it is easy to be emperor, if one takes reigning seriously? See how the crown presses down on his forehead, how heavy the purple lies on his shoulders".

She knocked energetically on the pane and when the emperor looked up, she nodded to him as to a good friend. Then he smiled kindly, opened the window and said, "presently, presently! A little longer still I must reign and then I am through for today."

But the Sleep Queen would not consent to that. "Think of the great parade in the morning," she said, then you must be fresh. It's to bed." It sounded sweetly persuasive as a dear mother speaks to her child. With that she laid the largest and most beautiful of her poppies on the table for him, and beside it the finest dream that she had,

it sparkled like a jewel.

Now it was not to be helped any longer. The emperor was suddenly obliged to yawn and to so stretch from weariness that his crown almost fell from his head. He could only close his official book, lay the crown, scepter and royal emblem on the chair before the door, so that the little maid on the next morning could take them to be polished and spring hastily into bed - then he fell to sleep immediately and smiled happily in his dream.

Satisfied the Sleep Queen flew on and tried after her.

From the window of a poor little house a light still shone. A mother sat there with weeping eyes by the bed of her sick child. She had loved the child above all measure and yet knew that she should lose it.

"If it can sleep, it is saved, but otherwise" the doctor had said at leaving - and the child did not sleep, but waited from fever, tossed on its pillow. The mother wept

louder and the little bird in the cage in the corner peeped out frightened.

"Hurry! Hurry!" Fred urged the Sleep Queen, but already she had laid one of her red flowers on the little bed of the child. And suddenly it became quiet, lightly and regularly the little breast breathed, the child slept, and with a smothered cry of joy the mother sank on her knees. Then the Sleep Queen drew her white hand softly over the mother's face, and a refreshing slumber closed the tear-wearied eyes.

Yes the Sleep Queen had been right when she said that she had much to do, and Fred did not wonder any longer that she had to sleep during the day to rest herself.

There were so many good children to visit and to present with beautiful dreams, to so many faithful workers, industrious housewives must refreshing sleep be brought with the poppies. To be sure they hastened by many windows without troubling about

them. Behind them lay the naughty children who were greedy, lied, and were disobedient, on to whose bed, in passing, they threw, if any thing at all, an ugly shrivelled dream, which frightened them, behind them lived wicked people who cheated and who tortured animals, greedy people who heaped up much money without giving to the poor, and many other bad people. They received ~~no~~ flowers from the Sleep Queen, but instead a bad conscience sat on their hearts, jured^{ed} them and bore down heavier than twelve baked potatoes. Yes Fred knew that.

But the good Sleep Queen did not come opportunely to every one.

There lived high up in a little garret a poor poet, to whom she was very friendly, and whom she had helped kindly many evenings, to forget the sorrow and disappointments of the day, in quiet slumber.

Today however with joyously laughter he indicated his refusal by raising his extended hand, when he caught sight of her dark

beautiful face at his little window.

"Many thanks for the visit," he said, "but I really have no time today." His eyes shone, "I await an honored guest," he went on, "It rings in my head - a story has come and the ⁱⁿuninvited come, they are the most distinguished. I must try to hold it fast. Perhaps it will bring me, acknowledgement and good luck, at last, at last, Oh, you surely know how necessary it is for me to have both.

The Sleep Queen nodded understandingly, took back the poppy, which she already had had in readiness for him and for good luck threw a few pretty, bright dreams into the room for the poet. Perhaps they would help him hold the stories that would come to him.

"I will notice the house number," said Fred, "and when his story is

printed, I will wish to have it
Christmas"

"That is a good thought," said the
Sleep Queen in praise.

The street through which they now
flew, seemed all at once strangely familiar
to Fred.

"There lives my friend Hans," he cried
rejoiced, pointing to a handsome house,
"You know the boy with the gold-spotted
salamander. Shall we bring him a flower
and a pretty dream?" "Then I will tell him
tomorrow morning in school that he
has me to thank for it and for that
he must work out for me both the
arithmetic problems which I missed."

The Sleep Queen seemed to hesitate,
irresolute she rummaged in her dream
baskets.

Then Fred suddenly saw in the
that stood at the window, the salamander

lying there on its back stiff and dead, so that one could see its black belly, and he cried angrily, "That is mean! It was certainly already sick yesterday and for that reason Hans did not want to show it to me. And yet for that he wanted to swindle me out of the pocket knife, the binding twine and the flint! The witch! And before the Sleep Queen could prevent it, he had hastily snatched the worst dream of all that she still had in her basket, and had thrown it at the head of his crafty friend. Then Hans groaned with fear.

"You are saucy," said the Sleep Queen angrily and gave Fred a little slap on the finger. "If you are rude I will take you no farther with me."

"I don't care," grumbled Fred obstinately. The shameful deception of Hans had quite spoiled his temper, and as they now flew

on, it pleased him to anger the good Sleep Queen with rude remarks.

"Don't give her any of your beautiful flowers, she is a silly goose," he grumbled as they saw in a pretty little room, a lovely blonde young girl lying in her white four post bed. "I know her well, she is the friend of my big sister. She used to be awfully nice and we have had much fun together. But now she has become silly. She does not bother herself about me any more, especially when my cousin, the tall lawyer is there. No I don't like her any more."

But the Sleep Queen did not listen to his words or she certainly would have slapped him on the mouth. She looked lovingly at the young, happy face in the white pillow, whose wide open eyes looked with a happy expression in the distance. The little girl held a picture in her hand which she now and then

carried to her innocent lips.

"Tomorrow he will come to mother, tomorrow I will be his betrothed," she whispered. "Oh! how I love him, how happy I am."

"Give her no flower," Fred protested anew.

"No," said the Sleep Queen softly, "she shall not sleep. She would be angry with me, if I should shorten her happy hours today - But you, my boy," the Sleep Queen went on, "I will now set down at home.

Really I ought to be angry at you, for lately you really have not been very good. But the pretty picture, that I just saw, has made me so happy, that I will let right give way to mercy and will assume" - here she smiled roguishly and slyly, "you were very very tired and did not know exactly what you said".

And then they already stood before the house in which lived Fred and his parents.

The Sleep Queen still carried one last

wonderful poppy in her arm.

She held it up high, "Who in the house shall I give it to?" she asked.

"To me, of course," answered Fred with accustomed modesty and was about to reach for the flower.

But suddenly he held in. Something had occurred to him.

"No," he said hastily, "I do not want it." Bring it rather to poor sick Mary, the seamstress, who lives in the highest story of the house. She coughs night and day and always says, "If I could only get a good sleep for a single night."

Then the Sleep Queen looked at Fred with her sweetest smile. "Now I love you very much again," she said heartily, patted him kindly on the shoulder and kissed him full on the mouth.

Of course she could not know how greatly Fred was averse to every kind of

tenderness, especially when it came from a feminine member, so much so that his grown sister for a joke, had written on her list of things desired for Christmas "a kiss from Freddy."

No, to allow himself to be kissed went against Fred's sense of manliness, even if it was done by the Sleep Queen in person. He shook himself then and said with some displeasure, "Let me be".

"No," she answered and suddenly it was his mother's laughing voice, "don't let me be!" "Boy, Boy, you are sleeping like a marmot! How will you get ready for school in time?"

He blinked his eyes, but closed them again immediately. My! That was the most decidedly the most remarkable of all the strange adventures of this night, that he now suddenly lay in his bed

again, without knowing how he had come in, and that in place of the Sleep Queen with whom he had just been talking his mother stood before him. His head turned about like a mill wheel.

"Mother" he murmured half aloud, "you must give me the story of the poet for Christmas, and Hans is awfully mean; he wanted to cheat me with the salamander."

"I believe you are still dreaming," said his mother laughing and rubbed a wet sponge over his face; then Fred opened his eyes and sprang out of bed. His first glance rested on the picture of the forest on the wall. Truly, there the gray little man was seated quietly under his mushrooms, as though he had never been away. But it seemed to Fred that the little man looked at him earnestly and gravely, and then the promise that he had given the forest sprite

came to him.

"Say, mother," said he and tied his shoe with great zeal, so he would not need to look up, "Yesterday evening I had already eaten ten baked potatoes, and not merely five, when you asked me.

His good mother nodded, "I know it," she answered. "Dorothy had counted them and told me afterward. But I am glad that you should confess it yourself. If you are really sorry you did it, then we will not talk of it any more."

Then a weight fell from Fred's heart, and with overflowing thankfulness he said to his mother, "I will give you whatever you want. Would you rather have the pocket knife or the flint?"

But his mother thanked him sincerely for both and said she would be satisfied with the promise that Fred

would never lie again. And he gave her that solemnly with, "potalók i póll".

Then another thought came to him suddenly.

"How is dressmaker Mary, mother?" he asked eagerly, "Did she sleep last night?"

"How did you come to think of that?" asked his mother astonished. "Yes she's feeling better. Last night, for the first time in a long while she had a good sleep. She told Dorothy so, when the latter took her milk in to her a while ago.

Fred became quite red for joy, looked mysterious, and was just about to begin to tell his mother his adventure with the Sleep Queen, then it seemed to him as if the forest sprite, in the picture, laid his finger lightly on his mouth as if he wanted to say: Let that rather remain in men, the big people are often so whimsical about such things,

they don't even believe it.

Then Fred kept his secret to himself.

Only he has trusted it to me and because it really is a truly remarkable experience I thought it would please you also to hear it, and for that reason I have now told it to you, But I first asked Fred's permission.

It will surely be the best for you to keep it to yourself and not speak any farther of it for the Sleep Queen does not like to be talked about much. She would rather work in silence.

But if she comes to you this evening and gives you a beautiful dream then you can give her little Fred's greetings. And mine too.

The White Owl

by
Agnes, Baroness of Verscheer

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"Did you see how she flew over?" said the polar fox to her black haired young, who sniffing, crowded into the warm passage, to the den. In it was to be found shelter from the storms and driving snow and from all the fierce cold outside, for it was quite far up in the north, on the coast of the island Spitzbergen, which lays much farther north than Norway and than all the other known regions of the colored map of Europe.

"Did you see the white owl?" "See whether she will fly once more over the cliffs! Observe her well; for she is a wonderful bird, much more than nine hundred years old, and her like is not to be found."

On the cold beach outside lay the seals and sunned themselves in the pale beams of the midnight sun, which always stood quite low on the horizon, and yet would not go down. They blinked with soft eyes and looked up thoughtfully; for they too had seen the white owl fly over.

This owl was the mysterious bird, which all the animals of the polar circle regarded with awe. She had seen much and had gathered great wisdom. Indeed, she had even seen the north pole! Her great, white wings carried her strong and secure over all the endless icy plains, which lay stretched out for hundreds of miles, between Spitzbergen and the north pole.

"But the owl can also fly to the south, even to that place where it is so horribly hot," said the polar bear, who sat under the cliff, on a block of ice. He shook his head with uneasiness at the thought of so much warmth. "She knows even the dwellings of mankind and has told us how crazy people are, because there are always, some of them who search for so long a time for the road to the north, that they get buried in ice or swallowed up by the sea."

"Or till the polar bear devours them"

said the old seal with the candid look. His hair was combed back smooth as a looking glass, and as soft as silk. He allowed himself to be combed by the waves, every morning, before he crawled to the shore for the comfortable sunning.

"Better that we devour them than that they should relish our paws," returned the polar bear and rolled his thick body to the other, colder side of the block of ice on which he rested. "Our beautiful white coat too they take from us, to dress themselves with it."

He struck forth his mighty paw on the ice so it cracked and splintered, so that a few clumsy penguins which sat near him on the shore, flew up frightened to light with a splash in the shallow water close by immediately afterward.

"Here don't make so much noise with your broad awkward web feet," cried the fox from the entrance to her den. "I hear another sound in the air. You know

my hearing is acute and never deceives! I hear the approaching flapping of the wings of the white owl."

In the twilight of the polar evening, she came silently flying with great outspread snow-white wings. She lit herself down on the cliff, from which the polar bear had just rolled back in awe, and looked over the coast with great wonderful eyes which were always veiled with gray. She was a magnificent bird in her spotless white, but the most beautiful thing about her was her eyes, which looked out as if she had seen all things of this earth and had fathomed all mysteries.

In the great stillness round about, one heard clearly every word when, with her low fine bird voice, she began to speak.

"I greet you my children of the northern ice ocean. I wanted to see you again on my journey to the south, and wanted

to tell you, what you will all like to hear, and of which nevertheless you know nothing. I will tell you of my last visit to the north pole. This year I was there for the thousandth time, therefore it was especially beautiful, and festive as a jubilee."

The owl struck her long, pointed claws more firmly into the gray moss of the cliff on which she sat.

"Yes, this time it was most unusually beautiful."

I sat on the axis of the earth and saw the sparkling silver stars, turn in ~~the~~ circle about me. They all appeared to celebrate the day in my honor, and for my old eyes, they sparkled almost too brightly this time. Orion had girded his sword around him like a hero, and the great bear and the small bear moved

about in the festival dance. The north star shone and seven stars seemed to beckon to me. The dragon drew his glittering tail over the black arch of heaven. Indeed there were stars without number, they twinkled down at me and taught me the old knowledge of the smallness of the earth.

Then the aurora borealis came and danced before me with her dazzling fire dances. The ice glimmered bluish in its light and my plumage also shone with a bluish gleam. The moon paled and even the midnight sun became turbid - for the aurora borealis rules at the north pole. Up there the sun is as though dead - and the storm too must keep silent. At the north pole it is always calm, you wouldn't hear even the cracking of the ice or the scream of birds - for in the circle about the axis of the earth there is always a deathly stillness.

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I was in this stillness three days and three nights and filled my old bird spirit with new wisdom.

But now I will fly southward as far as the ocean currents, on which the people like to float northward. How little and how weak they are in their ambitious struggle after glory and wisdom!

How many ships I saw disappear in the ice and how many skeletons I saw bleaching. Yes I saw one flying in the air - and yet plunged into the depths also. How can a human child try flight, if he does not have wings which are as strong and enduring as mine are.

At these words the hoary owl stretched her wings far out again.

"Fare well, - till next year!" she cried soaring upward - and the eyes of all followed the white vision, which just as quickly and silently as she had come, disappeared into the fog which lay over the inland.

"That was a beautiful story and that was wisdom," said the fox; but now, you good children, I think, we will be gay and dance, for the moon has risen and too much learning before going to sleep is not good for one.

The little foxes grasped each other by the paw and danced on the bright-washed pebbles of the beach, so that it was a pleasure to watch them. The seals rolled in the moon lit water till the foam spouted up high and the old polar bear growling, rolled farther back onto the beach. Only the fat penguins remained sitting immovable on the Cliff, they were too indolent to dance and perhaps too they were no longer young enough.

The soft fluttering fog that lay over the island, became thicker and veiled finally entirely the region to the south, whither the owl had disappeared.

Out of this region to the south a ship came riding slowly.

It was a good ship, built broad and strong, with heavy bow which could overcome even the hardest blocks of ice. Its masts were resinous pine trunks, grown in Sweden's coast forests and for that reason from youth were accustomed to the power of the ocean storms. It was the "Maria", the ship of the Swedish sailor, Olaf Erickson, who carried a great longing in his soul, an ambitious desire, to be the first of all his countrymen to see, what till now no human eye had seen - and finally to reach the north pole. Till now the "Maria" had ridden with a favorable wind past Norway's rocky coast, past steep dark North Cape, which is so sharply drawn, toward the expanse of the unknown waters of the arctic sea of ice stretched out behind it.

For days and nights always only watery expanse, steel gray and desolate in the powerless sun light - and then came the

bare coast of Spitzbergen. From there they wanted to go to mysterious Francis-Joseph land and farther upward to the place where on the map the great white patches begin - of which no one could say what is to be found there.

Every sailor who wishes to go up there, must know whether he has enough courage in his soul, to endure the awful polar night of six months duration, and in a cold which no one can correctly describe.

The sailor, Olaf Erickson, had such a courageous mind and a strong expectation of reaching his goal. He looked from the deck of his vessel on the cold gray water that was spread out before him, desolate and distant. The uniform rippling of the sea made him sleepy and he closed his eyes.

Then he saw in his dream the picture of his home. He saw a little white house in Sweden which lay nestling in the sunny dunes close to the beach. He looked

through the low window into a bright room and saw a woman sitting at a table; it was Maria, his wife. She was leaning on her left hand and her face was turned toward the sea. Her right hand held the wooden edge of a cradle in which a boy slept; that was his son. And in his dream he experienced once more the hour of departure in which Maria had kissed the golden wedding ring on his hand.

"You will never forget me as long as you have the ring and you will come again, please God," she had said.

Then Olof Erickson awoke and felt for his ring and pressed it tightly. He knew that he could not forget his wife and child, not in all eternity.

The white veil of the polar night, which is bright in the summer, because the sun does not set, sank down. It was twilight. In the rigging of the mast

rocked right and left, both the lanterns, red and green. The helmsman was in front in his little house, and the remaining crew rested in the cabins from the heavy day's work.

The course was to the north! Always straight ahead into the gray distance. The sailor looked up to see if the fog was still thickening, for no stars were to be seen, no light except the two lanterns. Then a strange light fell on his face. It came from a pair of eyes, which they had never seen before and were directed unflinchingly at Olof Erickson. On the yard of the main mast sat a great white owl, and in the fog which enveloped them, the feathers of this bird themselves seemed to be woven of damp strips of fog.

Was it an illusion, or was it a specter, which confused the mind of the sailor still half in a dream?

Noislessly the bird unfolded its wings and set itself down on the deck at Olaf's feet.

"See there, a polar bird, a white horned owl, such as are said to be seen in this region often," said the sailor.

But immediately afterward a choking feeling bound his throat, as the strange bird suddenly opened its mysterious eyes wide and let an entire bundle of golden beams shoot forth.

Then he heard a strange voice, which had no resemblance to people's voices, and which nevertheless he could understand very well.

"Damn the white owl," said the voice, "am the oldest of my race and come from the north pole to greet you Olaf Erickson."

"From the north pole"? The blood rose in the sailor's face for excitement, for this word meant to him, everything that his heart desired; honor, success, and the satisfaction

of his most secret wishes.

"Tell me of the north pole and if you can then direct me thither you strange bird," he cried out enthusiastically.

"Give me shelter on your ship, in your warm cabin, then I will see what I can do for you," returned the owl and when Olaf stretched out his arm as though he desired it, then she flew up from the floor and sat on it. She let him carry her down into his cabin carefully and as still in a dream.

"I will let myself come once somewhat nearer to these people; for that also will bring wisdom," said the owl low to herself. This time she said it in her own bird's voice, and the sailor did not understand a syllable of it. Down in the cabin Olaf let the owl set down on the edge of a little chest of dark oak, in which the companions of his solitude, his books, were stored. She sat there, just

as if she belonged there, and in her quiet looked like a stuffed animal.

Nothing disturbed her life except now and then a tired blink of the veiled eyes, but magnificent and milk-white sparkled her plumage even here in the dim light of the little oil lamp, which hung down from the ceiling. Olof Erickson had never seen such white owls in Sweden. In that country there were only gray and brown birds of this species, which hid themselves during the day and fluttered about in the pine forest at night. They hunted mice and cried, "kewit, kewit," so that many people were frightened at them.

However the sailor felt no fear of this owl, although he knew that she was no ordinary animal, but a bewitched bird. And because she spoke his own language and could understand it also, he became more and more confiding and talked

to her as to an old friend.

So she remained in the little cabin of the captain of the "Maria", many days and many nights.

The crew noticed the strange bird, without wandering much about it, for on a sea voyage one usually soon becomes accustomed to wandering.

The little sailor-boy slipped, one morning unnoticed into the cabin and after some hesitation and staring he cautiously stretched his finger out to touch slightly the white plumage, the two strong wings folded over the tail.

She permitted it but then she blinked her eyes and he shrank back frightened, and ran up on the deck again, as quick as his feet could carry him. The sailor on watch above who just then was filling a pipe, cleared his throat and said, "Why is our captain fond of the old screech

owl! If only the bird were at least edible
then to be sure it would be another
matter."

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In the quiet evening hours, when the
lamps down there burned comfortably
and one could forget the cold outside,
with the jolly rings of steam which rose
from the tea-kettle and glasses of grog, on
such evenings, the owl told the sailor
in her own way of the mysteries of the
North pole. To be sure he never exactly knew
afterward, whether he was awake or had
dreamed. But all these fabulous things took
strange hold of his soul - and finally quite
filled his mind and thoughts.

"Who wishes to reach the north pole,
must be able to leave and forget everything
else in the world, that is dear to him. He
also must not hope ever to return, for up
there is the kingdom of eternal forgetfulness."

So said the owl and it turned the heart of the sailor cold.

"Wife and child I can and will not forget, for I love them more than everything in the world," he said softly and pressed Marie's golden ring to his lips.

From this moment the owl knew that he never could win full power over this man, as long as the consecrated ring was on his hand. For that reason she endeavoured to rob him of the ring. On one night, as he lay on his bed in deep sleep, she flew quietly and slyly, down from her seat, flew on the edge of the bed and with her hooked bill picked and grasped for the little ring. The sailor stirred and was about to awaken, then she shot a flash of her eye at him, that stupefied him, and he did not notice that the bird took the ring from his finger and drew it over her own right claw, clear up

under the thick feathers of the wing. There it was hidden safely and no longer visible to any one.

On the next morning when the sailor awoke, the ring had disappeared and with it the ring's benediction, and he did not even notice it, for he had forgotten his wife and child, his home and everything that lay back of him.---

"Land out of sight and farther, the course was to the north," said the pilot, and turned between his hands the heavy helm which, from much handling had already become quite bright and black.

In the meantime autumn had come and the long dark polar night had begun.

Outside it was terribly cold and the masses of ice soon stopped the course of the ship, so that it remained lying tight-walled in the enormous mass of ice.

Without motion, but also without fear, for one was prepared for such long

cold months and for the desolation of the wait in the darkness.

The cabins in spite of all this were warm and comfortable. The oil lamps burned and the little iron stoves became hot, till they almost burst from heat.

The crew crawled away in the warm hole, in the inside of the ship-like marmots.

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"Hold out till the sun returns in the spring, then I will lead you to the north pole," the owl whispered in the ear of the sailor, and she kept easing for him, the tedium of the darkness with her magic stories.

"Look out through the hatchway at the ice," she said, "Do you see the northern lights gleaming from the horizon? Do you see its magnificent, blue light, which illuminates the snow fields, and the glittering white and red bow out of which bright beams of light shoot up? Entire sheafs of fire, it hurls up to the sky! That is fire-works such as you

men could not imitate.

Do you hear, outside the hoarse cry of the polar wolf, of which all the animals are afraid? But you do not fear, for he can not harm you, as long as I am with you and protect you. All animals know and honor me and will leave off fighting and quarreling when I show myself among them.

Olaf Erickson, on a calm night, lay rolled in thick bear skins, on the deck and stared up at the blue-black heavens over him, with the innumerable stars. They glimmered in his eyes, and the longer he looked up, that much greater became their number. An old song came to his mind:

"Do you know how many stars stand
In the blue canopy of heaven?"

He had heard it sung before, but he did not know any more, where, and where, and by whom. Because he had forgotten everything that lay back of him, so he had forgotten

also that it was the song which his wife had so often sung, when she sat by the cradle of their child.

He tried to count the stars, but it was a fruitless task and confused his thoughts. However he could not sleep and that was also not prudent in this cold, even if one was wrapped to his nose in a bear skin.

The owl fluttered up out of the cabin and seated itself on the thick, greenish, pane of glass over the compass card. In the warm boarded partition on the fore-deck howled the hounds, which were appointed to draw the heavy sledge over the ice.

"Wait till spring comes, till the high ice wall over there, will again become lower, then I will set in front, on your sledge and steer it!", said the owl. "Then the storm wind will come, who hastens quicker than twenty hounds, he will drive you over the bright black ice field, over gaps and fissures and over the yawning abysses."

It blows the great white ships, the icebergs, before it, as light as birds feathers. "That is the flat of the north pole!" They will encircle your ship and lead it to the north pole, Olay Erickson!"

"And sink us all together and let us be drowned," thought the sailor, and a secret dread took hold of him.

Was this bird really a friend or was it a demon, which enticed and charmed him? Was it the demon of his own ambitious thoughts, which had taken shape in this animal? Would this owl drive him and his good ship and his faithful crew, which trusted in him, to ruin while she deceived him with things which did not exist, and promised him glory, which in reality could never be fulfilled?

Often now such thoughts went uneasily through the sailor's mind when he lay awake in the lonely nights and brooded while his people slept soundly. — — —

But the great stillness of these nights in the frost bound about the ship came to an end one day.

First one heard only a dull roar in the distance, like the rolling of distant thunder, which again became silent, and after awhile resounded anew.

The magnetic needle of the compass began to waver, for it felt first of all the great occurrence, that was announced, the near breaking up of the ice, the coming of spring!

At that the storm began its deafening noise, howling it went over the ship, so that it trembled in every joint. He threw whole sacks full of glistening snow flakes, into the face of everyone, who ventured up on the deck, and tore the good tight rigging of the mast in a hundred little shreds.

"Whew, how he presses us and tries to bend us," said the mast trees, which were in reality strong pine trunks from Sweden. "We haw, we nod, we haw - but we do not break!"

The storm wind's loud voice was drowned

by the crashing of the breaking ice. As the lumps of ice shoved and pressed each other packed up into high walls and then divide again, till the sea water which was pressing forward overflowed them.

Everyone on board the "Maria" became excited.

Also the owl waved her wings and seated herself on the tottering main yard to look about over the wide battle field of the ice.

"Woe, how the bringer of spring, the south wind blows, which wishes to carry me, and all with me on its strong wings! I greet the south wind and invite him to accompany me on my thousand and first journey to the north pole!"

In the frightful noise the sailor did not understand what the owl said. He no longer paid any attention to her, a great anxiety for his ship and his crew had taken hold of him. More and more powerful the sea flooded over the melting ice and all at once the

"Maria", lay free again in the deep water, she veered in a circle, and it cost a great effort to keep her under control, and to guard her against the driving blocks of ice. In the rush of the shock, he did not pay attention to what came from the west, from the great free water side. Only the owl saw it; she fluttered down from her mast and sat on the shoulder of the sailor.

"Look about you, Olaf Erickson, they are coming, they're coming, the whiteships which will haul you on your happy journey to the north."

The sailor looked to the side and saw with fright the many white dots, which appeared on the horizon and became larger every second and driven by the current came on with the swiftness of the wind.

Those were the dreadful icebergs which brought certain destruction to every ship.

"We must steer to the south and get out of their way, Captain!" cried the helmsman.

"Otherwise we are lost. Give the command; 'Course to the south.' Why do you hesitate? Do you wish all of us to go to our death?"

Olaf Erickson stood as though petrified; he looked at the swimming mountain, which ~~standing~~ out of the water, as high as a house, came on with frightful velocity straight toward the "Maria."

"She will do nothing to you, as long as I am with you. Keep the course to the north," whispered the owl in his ear.

As she saw that he was irresolute, she flew with rustling wings to the rudder and sat on it. She raised her right claw threateningly and prepared for defense against any — then something glittering fell down from under her wing, and rolled on the smooth ship's deck, straight to the feet of the Captain.

It was his golden wedding ring, the ring which "Maria" had given him. He bent

and took it and placed the little circle again on the finger of his left hand - then he straightened himself up.

"Course to the south, helmsman!" he cried with a loud voice and quick as lightning the latter turned the heavy rudder about, so that the owl lost her hold and fluttered back before the rough grasp of the seaman.

"Course to the south!" - - - The ship quivered and turned in the foaming water. At this moment the househigh mass of the iceberg passed the bow of the evasive ship, missing it by a hairs breadth. - - -

"Back to our home, back to Maria! I will save you all and lead you homeward!" cried the sailor, but his voice was drowned by the crashing of the colliding icebergs.

The white owl had left the southward escaping ship. She sat on the mast no longer, she sat on the floating iceberg and rode with it into the dark distance.

of the northern waters.

Olaf Erickson looked after her, but his thoughts were not of her any more; his thoughts were of his wife and child, whom he had been able to forget the whole winter long. Now he was going back to them at full speed, and no demon bird would longer prevent him steering in a southern course. At this moment there appeared a narrow blood-red strip over the ice, in the east, it was the first sign of the spring sun, which was finally returning.

The owl rode on the iceberg, as far to the north as the open water reached, then she stretched out her wings and flew over the great ice waste, which extended endlessly before her to the north pole of which everyone knows. With the children of men and their doings she would have no more to do. She turned back to her

cold region, to the animals which lived there, and which respected and understood her.

Back of the thick veil, which always covers the impenetrable region of the North pole, she disappeared.