

AN INTERESTING PAGE FOR THE BOYS AND GIRLS.

The Christmas Masquerade

Mary E. Wilkins



On Christmas Eve the mayor's mansion presented a beautiful appearance. There were rows of different colored wax candles burning in every window, and beyond them one could see the chandeliers of gold and crystal, blazing with light. The fiddlers were squeaking merrily, and lively little forms flew past the window in time to the music.

There were gorgeous carpets laid from the door to the street, and carriages were constantly arriving and fresh guests tripping over them. They were all children. The mayor, who was a very philanthropic man, was giving a Christmas masquerade tonight to all the children in the city, the poor as well as the rich.

The preparation for this ball had been making an immense sensation for the last three months. Placards had been up in the most conspicuous points in the city, and all the daily newspapers had at least a column devoted to it, headed with "THE MAYOR'S

sense of the word.

So they decided to be fairies and shepherds and princesses according to their own fancies, and this new costume never failed to have the most charming costumes to suit them.

It was noticeable that, for the most part, the children of the rich, who had always had everything they desired, would choose the parts of goose-girls, and peasants, and such like; and the poor children jumped eagerly at the chance of being princesses or fairies for a few hours in their miserable lives.

When Christmas Eve came and the children flocked into the mayor's mansion, whether it was owing to the costumer's art or their own adaptation to the characters they had chosen, it was wonderful how lifelike their representations were.

Those little fairies in their short skirts of silken gauze in which golden sparkles appeared as they moved, with their little funny gossamer wings like butterflies, looked like real fairies. It did not seem possible, when they floated around to the music, half supported on the tips of their dainty toes, half by their filmy, purple wings, their delicate

golden and wore a white dress and a little cap woven of blue violets on her yellow hair. Her name was Violetta.

The supper was served at midnight—and such a supper! The mountains of pink and white loaves and the cakes with sugar castles and flower garden on top of them, and the charming shapes of gold and ruby-colored jellies!

There were wonderful bonbons, which even the mayor's daughter did not have every day, and all sorts of fruit, fresh and candied.

They had cowslip wine in green glasses, and elderberry wine in red, and they drank each other's health. The glasses held a thimbleful each; the mayor's wife thought that was all the wine they ought to have. Under each child's plate there was a pretty present and every one had a basket of bonbons and cake to carry home.

At 4 o'clock the fiddlers put up their fiddles and the children went home; fairies and shepherds and pages and princesses all jabbering gleefully about the splendid time they had had.

But in a short time what consternation there was throughout the city! When the proud and fond parents attempted to unbutton their children's dresses in order to prepare them for bed not a single costume would come off.

The buttons buttoned again as fast as they were unbuttoned; even if they pulled out a pin, in it would slip again in a twinkling, and when a string was untied it tied itself up again into a bow-knot.

The parents were dreadfully frightened. But the children were so tired out they finally let them go to bed in their fancy costumes, and thought perhaps they would come off better in the morning.

So Red Riding Hood went to bed in her little red cloak, holding fast to her basket full of dainties for her grandmother, and Bo-Peep slept with her crook in her hand.

The children all went to bed readily enough, they were so very tired, even though they had to go in this strange array. All but the fairies—they danced and prouetted, and would not be still.

"We want to swing on the blades of grass," they kept saying, "and play a nap between the leaves of the rose."

The poor charwomen and coalheavers, whose children the fairies were for the most part, stared at them in great distress. They did not know what to do with these radiant, frisky little creatures into which the Johnnies and Pollies and Bessies were so suddenly transformed. But the fairies went to bed quietly enough when daylight came, and were soon fast asleep.

There was no further trouble till 12 o'clock, when all the children woke up. Then a great wave of alarm spread over the city. Not one of the costumes would come off then.

The buttons buttoned as fast as they were unbuttoned, the pins quitted themselves in as fast as they were pulled out, and the strings flew round like lightning and twisted themselves into bow-knots as fast as they were untied.

And that was not the worst of it; every one of the children seemed to have become, in reality, the character which he or she had assumed.

The mayor's daughter declared she was going to tend her geese out in the pasture, and the shepherds sprang out of their little beds of down, throwing aside their silken quilts, and cried that they must go and watch their sheep. The princesses jumped up from their straw palaces and wanted to go to court, and all the rest of them likewise.

Poor little Red Riding Hood sobbed and sobbed because she couldn't go and carry her basket to her grandmother, and as she didn't have any grandmothers she couldn't go, of course, and her parents were very much troubled. It was all so mysterious and dreadful.

The news spread very rapidly over the city—indeed, they hardly had a house that was not afflicted—and soon a great crowd gathered round the new costumer's shop, for everyone thought he must be responsible for all this mischief.

The shop door was locked, but they soon battered it down with stones. When they rushed in the costumer was not there. He had disappeared with all his wares.

Then they did not know what to do. But it was evident that they must do something before long, for the state of affairs was growing worse and worse.

The mayor's little daughter braced her back up against the tapestried wall and planted her two feet in their thick shoes firmly. "I will go and tend my geese," she kept crying. "I won't eat my breakfast! I won't go out in the park! I won't go to school! I'm going to tend my geese—I will, I will, I will!"

And the princesses trailed their rich trains over the rough, unpainted floors in their parents' poor little huts, and held their crowned heads very high and demanded to be taken to court.

The princesses were, mostly, geese-girls when they were their proper selves, and their geese were suffering, and their poor parents did not know what they were going to do, and they

When Long Breaths Hurt

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They wrung their hands and wept as they gazed on their gorgeously-apparelled children.

Finally the mayor called a meeting of the aldermen and they all assembled in the city hall.

Nearly every one of them had a son or a daughter who was a chimney-sweep or a little watch girl, or a shepherdess. They appointed a chairman, and they took a great many votes; and contrary votes. But they did not agree on anything until someone proposed that they consult the Wise Woman.

Then they all held up their hands and voted to, unanimously.

So the whole board of aldermen set out, walking by twos, with the mayor at their head, to consult the Wise Woman.

The aldermen were all very fleshy and carried gold-headed canes, which they swung very high at every step. They held their heads well back and their chins stiff, and whenever they met common people they sniffed gently.

They were very imposing. The Wise Woman lived in a little hut on the outskirts of the city. She kept a black cat; except for her, she was all alone. She was very old and had brought up a great many children, and she was considered remarkably wise.

But when the aldermen reached her hut and found her seated by the fire holding her black cat, a new difficulty presented itself.

She had always been quite deaf and people had been obliged to scream as loud as they could in order to make her hear; but lately she had grown much deaf, and when the aldermen attempted to tell her the case before her she could not hear a word.

In fact, she was so very deaf that she could not distinguish a tone below G sharp. The aldermen screamed till they were quite red in their faces, but to no purpose—none of them could get up to G sharp, of course.

So the aldermen went back swinging their gold-headed canes and they had another meeting at the city hall.

Then they decided to send the highest soprano singer in the church choir to sing to G sharp; just as easy as not. So the high soprano singer set out for the Wise Woman's in the mayor's coach, and the aldermen marched behind, swinging their gold-headed canes as usual.

The high soprano singer put her head down close to the Wise Woman's ear, and sang all about the Christmas Masquerade, and the dreadful dilemma everybody was in, in G sharp—she even went higher sometimes—and the Wise Woman heard every word. She nodded three times, and every time she nodded she looked wiser.

"Go home, and give 'em a spoonful of castor oil, all 'round," she piped up; then she took a pinch of snuff, and wouldn't say any more.

So the aldermen went home and each one took a district, and marched through it with a servant carrying an immense bowl and spoon, and every child did to take a dose of castor oil.

But it didn't do a bit of good. The children cried and struggled when they were forced to take the castor oil; but two minutes afterward, the chimney sweeps were crying for their brooms, and the princesses screaming because they couldn't go to court, and the mayor's daughter, who had been given a double dose, cried louder and more sturdily. "I want to go out and tend my geese! I will go and tend my geese!"

So the aldermen took the high soprano singer and they consulted the Wise Woman again. She was taking a nap this time, and the singer had to sing up to B flat before she could wake her. Then she was very cross and the black cat put up his back and spit at the aldermen.

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They tried a ladder, but the ladder fell back the moment it touched the tree and lay sprawling upon the ground.

Finally they brought axes and thought they could chop the tree down—costumer and all; but the wood resisted the axes as if it were iron, and only dented them, receiving no impression itself.

Meanwhile the costumer sat up in the tree, eating cherries and throwing the stones down. Finally he stood up on a stout branch and, looking down, addressed the people.

"It's of no use, your trying to accomplish anything in this way," said he. "You'd better parley. I'm willing to come down to terms with you and make everything right on two conditions."

The people grew quiet, and then the mayor stepped forward as spokesman. "Name your two conditions," said he rather testily. "You own, tactfully, that you are the cause of all this trouble."

"Well," said the costumer, reaching out for a handful of cherries. "This Christmas masquerade of yours was a beautiful idea, but you wouldn't do it every year, and your successors might not do it at all. I want those poor children to have a Christmas every year. My first condition is that every poor child in the city hangs its stocking for gifts in the city hall on every Christmas Eve, and gets it filled, too. I want the resolution filed and put away in the city archives."

"We agree to the first condition," cried the people with one voice, without waiting for the mayor and aldermen.

"The second condition," said the costumer, "is that this good young cherry-man here has the mayor's daughter, Violetta, for his wife. He has been kind to me, letting me live in his cherry tree

and eat his cherries, and I want to reward him."

"We consent!" cried all the people; but the mayor, though he was generous was a proud man. "I will not consent to the second condition," he cried, angrily.

"Very well," replied the costumer, picking some more cherries, "then your youngest daughter tends geese the rest of her life, that's all."

The mayor was in great distress, but the thought of his youngest daughter being a goosegirl all her life was too

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