



It was the night before Christmas and story "Squash, squash!" went the wheels of the carriage in the mud. "Whew-ew-ew!" whistled the wind. And it blew Peter's hat out into the middle of the road. "Whoo!" yelled Peter and climbed down from his high seat. The princess poked her head out of the window. "What's the matter?" she asked. "My hat blew off," Peter told her, "and the wheel is stuck in the mud, miss." "Oh, Peter, Peter!" the princess chided. "You must get that wheel out of the mud at once." "Which is easier said than done," Peter grumbled. "It's that dark I can't see my hand before me." "There's a light here!" there among the trees," the princess informed him. "Perhaps you could get some one to help you."



"I'll go and see, miss, if you ain't afraid to stay alone," said Peter, after some effort succeeding in quieting the plunging horses. "I am dreadfully afraid," she admitted shivering, "but I suppose you will have to go." Now, in the middle of the pine grove was set the little cottage. Peter knocked at the door. "Who's there?" asked a childish voice, and a little girl poked her head out of the square window. "Our wheel is stuck in the mud," Peter answered from the dark, "and I want to get a man to help me." "There isn't any man here," Jenny informed him. "There is only me and Jessie, and our mother has gone to nurse a sick neighbor, and she won't be home until morning."

So Peter went back to the carriage and reported to the princess. "I shall freeze out here," said the princess. "I will go up to the house and sit by the fire while you look for some one to help you with the carriage."

She climbed out of the carriage, and with Peter in the lead she plodded through the woods, and the wind blew her long coat this way and that, and at last, wet and panting, she came to the little house.

And once more Peter knocked, and once more Jenny came to the window. Then she flung the door wide open, and so tall was the princess that she had to stoop to enter it. It was a dingy little room, and there was a dumpy black stove in the corner, with a babbling iron pot that gave forth a most appetizing odor.

"Oh, oh, how nice and warm it is!" said the princess as she held out her hands to the fire.

In all their lives the little girls had never beheld such a wonderful person, for the princess wore a long red cloak and a black velvet hat, with a waving plume, and her muff was big and round and soft, and she had a scarf of the same soft fur about her neck. Her hair was pale gold, and she had the bluest eyes and the reddest lips, and her smile was so sweet and tender that Jenny ran right up to her and cried, "Oh, I am so glad that you came!"

Jessie from her little chair echoed her sister's words. But she did not run, for there was a tiny crutch beside Jessie's chair in the square window. "And I am glad to be here," said the princess, whose quick eyes were taking in the details of the shabby room. "It's so nice and warm and cozy."

"Isn't it?" said Jenny happily. "And we are getting ready for tomorrow." On a small round table beside Jessie's chair was a tiny cedar bush, and Jessie's fingers had been busy with



THAT
BEAUTIFUL
CHRISTMAS

BY
FRANK H. SWEET

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bits of gold and blue and scarlet paper.

"We are going to pop some popcorn," Jenny explained, "and string it and hang it on the tree."

"Oh, may I help?" the princess asked. "I haven't popped any corn since I was a little girl."

Jessie clasped her thin little hands. "I think it would be the loveliest thing in the world," she said, "if you would stay."

"Peter is going to find some one to help with the carriage, and I will stay until he comes back."

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princess. "But let's go on with the rhyme, just for fun. I see you know it all through, so you mustn't mind my changing it a little."

"When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter," Jenny sprang from her chair to see what was the matter.

Away to the window she flew like a flash. Two open the shutters and threw up the sash.

When what to her wondering eyes should appear—

"But a miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer!"

"Oh, no! I forgot! I mean—"

"When what to her wondering eyes should appear—"

"But a carriage stuck in the mud right out here!"

And a little old driver, so lively and quick—

You must have thought Peter was dear old St. Nick."

The children laughed gleefully, and Jenny said: "We would have thought that, only we aren't going to hang up our stockings this Christmas, at all."

Jessie and I aren't going to get any presents, for mother hasn't been well, and underneath it she wore a shining silver gown, and around her neck was a collar of pearls.

"And now if you will lend me an apron," she said, "we will pop the corn."

But Jessie and Jennie were gazing at her speechless.

"Oh, you must be a fairy princess," gasped little Jessie at last.

The beautiful lady laughed joyously. "Peter calls me the princess," she said. "He has lived with me ever since I was a little girl. But really I am just an everyday young woman and am going to spend Christmas with some friends in the next town."

She dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand.

And now to our popcorn," she said. Jenny brought a green gingham apron, and the princess tied the apron on, making a big butterfly bow of the strings in the back, and then she danced over to the dumpy little stove and peeped into the bubbling pot.

"Did you ever smell anything so good?" she asked. "I am as hungry as a bear."

The little girls laughed joyously. "It's bean soup," Jenny said, "and we are going to have it for supper, with some little dumplings in it. I was afraid it wasn't nice enough for you."

"Nice enough!" the delighted lady exclaimed. "I think bean soup and little dumplings are—um—um!"

And she dug out her hands expressively. "I thought," Jessie remarked faintly, "that fairy princesses only ate honey and dew."

"Which shows that I am not a true princess," said the beautiful lady, "for honey and dew would never satisfy me."

Jenny got out three little blue bowls and set them on a table that was spread with a coarse but spotless cloth. There were a crusty loaf and clover sweet butter, and last and best of all there were the bean soup and the bubbling little dumplings served together in an old nutmeg tureen.

It was perfectly wonderful to see the princess in her shining gown at



But we won't have to pretend about the mince pie, for mother has made a lovely one."

"I wish I could help you eat the chicken," said the princess wistfully, "and I should like to meet your mother. I know she is lovely. And I haven't any mother, you know."

"Oh!" said the little girls, round eyed with sympathy. And then the princess told them that all her life she had lived in a big, lonely house and she had always yearned for a cozy home and for a sister.

After supper they popped the corn, and just as they finished to come Peter

of fan! and any one to help, miss," he announced, "and it's snowing. I'll have to unhitch the horses and go back to—now and get something to take you over in."

"No," the princess demurred as she stood in the middle of the room with a heaped-up dish of snowy kernels in her hand. "No, Peter, I'm going to stay here all night."

Peter stared, and the little girls cried, and the princess said: "I really will. And Peter, you can bring up the steamer trunk and my bag."

"Won't your friends expect you, miss?" Peter inquired, as if awaiting orders.

"I will send a note by you," was the calm response. And as the man went out she followed him and shut the door behind her. "Oh, Peter, Peter!" she whispered confidentially. "I am going to give them such a Christmas!"

"The little girls, miss?"

"Yes. They are so sweet and brave! And I have the presents in my trunk that I was going to carry to the other children. But they will have so much that they won't miss them, and I shall spend my Christmas in a little house, but it will be a joyful house, Peter."

"Yes, miss," Peter agreed understandingly.

"I wish we had a big tree," said the princess regretfully.

"Well, leave that to me, miss," Peter told her eagerly. "You just get them little things to sleep early, and I'll be here with a tree."

"Oh, Peter, Peter—Santa Claus!" exclaimed the princess gleefully. "It will be the nicest Christmas that I have had since I was a wee bit of a girl."

So Peter went away, and the princess, with her eyes shining like stars, danced back into the room and said, "Oh, let's play marbles!"

Jessie and Jenny had never heard of such a game, but the princess told them that she was a ship on the high seas and that they were to tell from her cargo what country she hailed from.

"I carry tea," she began. "Where do I hail from?"

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