

Young People

THE FAIRY MOUSE

Now, Clara, be a good little girl while mother is out. Then we will see what Santa Claus will bring you on Christmas Day," said Mrs. Budd, fastening on a black bonnet, trimmed with a nodding green feather, and placing a purple velvet cape, that had seen better days, on her comfortable shoulders.

"Will he bring Clara a wax dolly? With golden hair an' blue eyes, an' a hat with feathers on it, an' a green parasol, an' a necklace an' stockings, an' brown shoes, an'—an'—" said Clara, dancing round her mother.

"We shall see what we shall see when Christmas comes," said Mrs. Budd, taking down a bunch of keys from a nail by the door. "Toys cost money; and poor Father Christmas may not have

enough pennies to buy dollies for all his little friends. Now, mind you are a good girl, my pretty. Santa Claus loves good children. Polly Malony, upstairs, will look in and put you to bed by and by."

Coming up the dark wooden stairs, as Mrs. Budd was going cautiously down, was a pale, tired-looking girl, carrying a baby on her arm, while a small boy held her hand and a little girl dragged on to her skirts.

"Why, Polly, how cold you look, to be sure!" said Mrs. Budd. "I've told my Clara you would look in and see her some time in the evening."

"Sure I will, Mrs. Budd," said the girl, resting the baby on the banister. "We have been out to see the shops: the little ones wanted to look at all the pretty things put out for Christmas. It is very cold, and just beginning to snow."

"There's a bit of fire in my grate, my dear. Do 'ee go in and boil up the kettle. There are some nice tea-leaves left in the teapot, and they'll freshen up with some boiling water; and there's some bread and treacle on the table. Help yourselves." And kind-hearted Mrs. Budd trotted out of the house into Boot Alley.

Outside a toyshop a row of small children stood gazing with admiring eyes at a large wax doll displayed in the window, dressed in an apple-green colored silk dress, pink sunshade in hand.

"That's the doll my Clara has set her heart on," thought Mrs. Budd. "Price one-and-five-three, it's marked. That's a large sum of money for Father Christmas to spend. I don't know how I could get it together. Even if I could save it, then there are those poor motherless children upstairs; and I should really be buying clothes and food for them, in-

stead of a toy for Clara." And Mrs. Budd sighed as she trudged onward.

Mrs. Budd was a charwoman, and she lived with her little daughter, Clara, aged six, in Boot Alley. In the rooms above Mrs. Budd dwelt the Malonys. The eldest girl, Polly, since her mother's death some months before, had had to be her father's housekeeper, and mother to her brothers and sisters. Mr. Malony was often out of work, and then food and fuel would be very scarce in the Malony household.

As Mrs. Budd walked towards the neighborhood of Covent Garden, where she went every night to clean some offices, again and again she thought of the Malony children, and their fireless room troubled her motherly heart.

"One-and-five-three is a lot of money. If I do try and save it, a penny here and a penny there, I do believe I should spend it on things for the Malonys instead of Clara," she said to herself, as she unlocked the street door leading to the offices, and climbed the stairs to the first floor. "However, doll or no doll, I must set to work, or I shall be like the old woman with the pig in my Clara's story-book—I shall never get home to my cottage to-night."

The offices, deserted by all except Mrs. Budd, were very quiet; no sound was to be heard in the building save what Mrs. Budd made with her broom as she went from room to room, brushing, sweeping, and dusting. Suddenly she stopped, letting the broom drop with a clatter, while she threw up her hands in amazement. She stared round the room, her eyes wide open with astonishment, for she had distinctly heard a tiny, clear voice say:

"Mrs. Budd, I wish to speak to you."

Mrs. Budd looked nervously in every place, likely and unlikely, for a sign of the speaker. Up the chimney, under the table, in the waste-paper baskets, even peeped into the coalbox, but could see no one. Then the voice came again.

"Mrs. Budd, I wish to speak to you," said someone in silvery tones. "Here I am! On your broom. Don't you see me?"

Then, when Mrs. Budd looked at her broom, which she had rested against the table, she saw, sitting at the very tip of the handle, a dear little mouse, with a fat round body, very bright black eyes, and a long curly tail.

"I came up here to be out of the way of your feet," it said. "I was so afraid you might accidentally step on me."

"Why, lawks-a-mussy! I never did hear tell of a mouse who could talk!" remarked Mrs. Budd, eyeing the mouse with great surprise. "I wish my Clara were here to see you."

"I am a Fairy Mouse: that is why I can speak so nicely," explained the mouse, nimbly running down the handle of the broom, and briskly beginning to climb Mrs. Budd's dress. "Please do not be frightened. I assure you I do not bite."

Mrs. Budd was "all of a shake," as she said afterwards; the green feathers in her bonnet waved wildly to and fro, like the treetops on a windy day; her knees trembled, and the few teeth she had left in her head chattered.

The mouse curled itself up cosily in one of her large hands, and looked at Mrs. Budd inquisitively out of its bright eyes.

"I must get on with my story, or your work will never be finished if I keep you talking too long," it said. "As I told you, I am a Fairy Mouse. I was turned out of Fairyland some weeks ago by the Queen of the Fairies, who was very angry because I made my nest in her best bandbox. I was expelled by her to these offices."

"Fairyland! I didn't know there was such a place nowadays, what with these hairships and motor-cars all over the place," said Mrs. Budd. "My granny, when I was a little girl, and lived in Cornwall, used to tell stories of witches and pixies, and suchlike, but I thought it was all 'make-believe.'"

"Well, I hope you will think differently for the future, Mrs. Budd," said the mouse, speaking rather severely. "To continue my story, when I first came here I felt very sad, as I was afraid some misfortune would happen to me. Oh, dear! how I did worry! I thought I should starve, or, more horrible still, be eaten by a cat. But you



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