

HALF-PAST SEVEN STORIES



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Once in about every so often, it seems, little boys just have to get sick. Sometimes it is their own fault; sometimes the fault of the weather; and sometimes there doesn't seem to be any reason at all—except maybe germs. And who ever saw a real live germ walking around, except, perhaps, doctors looking through microscopes? And, besides, germs are too tiny to make a real big boy with pockets in his trousers, and a reader, and a geography, go to bed.

But that is just what had happened to Marmaduke.

He hadn't felt so sick in the daytime—just sort of dreamy, and not like playing at all. He only wanted to lie where he could watch the fingers of the sun-beams stray over the rag rug and pick out the pretty colors in it, and where he could see Mother and call to her when he wanted her. That was always important—to have her near.

At supper all Mother would give him was a cup of warm milk. She said he couldn't have anything solid, not even bread. But after all, perhaps it was better, for his appetite wasn't so very big. He had only asked because he thought he ought to have things Jehosophat had, and didn't want to be deprived of any of his privileges.

Those two round things—like cherries—stuck in his throat so. What was it the doctor called them? Tonsils, that was it. And they felt as big as footballs now, and, oh, so sore!

The doctor decided he had "tonsil-eatus"—a funny name. He called out to Mother to inquire if they would really "eat us"—and how they could "eat us" when they were in your throat already. He felt rather proud of that joke and better for having made it—for a little while, anyway.

There was one "speshully fine" thing about being sick. Mother would always send Jehosophat and Hepzebiah into the spare room to sleep, and she would come herself and lie down in Jehosophat's bed, right next to the little sick boy, right where he could reach out his hand and place it in hers. That was "most worth" all the aches and the pains.

It was all right to have Father near, but somehow Marmaduke felt better if it was Mother that lay by his side. Her hands and her voice were sort of cool and they drove the bad things that came in his dreams far away.

There was one other fine thing about being sick: the Fairy Lamp!

At least that was what the children had named it. It was really a little blue bowl, not light blue like his oatmeal bowl, but almost as blue as periwinkles, or the sky some nights. It had little creases on the outside, "flutings," Mother said, like the pleats in her dress. Inside the bowl was a thick white candle, and it had a curly black wick like a kewpie's topknot.

Now Mother wanted to make sponge for the bread, but Marmaduke pleaded,—

"I want you to stay with me, I feel so sick."

"Wouldn't my little boy let me go—just for five minutes?"

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He thought that over for a little while. Then, "Yes," he said slowly, "if you light the Fairy Lamp."

So she struck the match and touched it to the wick. The wick always seemed lazy about being lit. It acted as if the match were waking it up.

But all of a sudden it would burst into flame, and the dark blue of the bowl would turn into light blue—oh, such a pretty color, not like the bluing Hannah put in the water to make the clothes white, nor would it match Sophy Soapstone's electric blue dress. It was more like a blue mist, just such a shade as the fairies would wear.

Marmaduke watched it a long time. Sometimes the little flame sputtered, sometimes it waved in the air, or dipped and bowed in his direction, and once it actually winked at him.

From where he lay he could see a bright star shining through the window. He tried to look with one eye at the light and with the other eye at the star, both at the same time. The star seemed sort of blue, too.

"I wonder if the little light is the baby of the star," he said to himself.

And when he looked at the star again, he saw a ray travel down from it into the window, right towards his eyes.

He blinked, and the light grew brighter. It made a pathway reaching from the sky to his bed. Something seemed to be traveling down the bright pathway, singing a song as it came.

First he thought it must be an angel, then a fairy with wings like a moth.

He shut his eyes a minute, to see what would happen, and he heard the voice singing a funny sort of song—no, not funny, but pretty.

And this was the song:

"Light, light
By day or night;
Stars in the skies,
Stars in the eyes."

He opened his. And there before him, in front of the window, stood a little lady. He thought she was dressed in white, then he decided it was yellow, then gold and white.

She walked, yet she seemed to be pasted on a big, shiny star. The top point rose just above her head, making the peak of a crown. The two middle points stuck out beyond her shoulders like bright moth wings, and the two bottom points extended below her waist, and away from her, like the ends of a sash.

At first Marmaduke thought she must be a painted doll, such as you see in the magazines about Christmas time, made for little children to cut out. But her golden hair was not still like that, but was always in motion like crinkly water that flows over the stones in the brook when the sun shines on it. And there on the rag rug, his own rag rug, were her little feet—very white, with little toes, and she could sing, too. My, how she could sing! No, she was not any painted doll.

She was going on with that song now:

"Far and near,

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Bright and clear,
On sky and sea,
And the Christmas tree.”

“Llo!” said Marmaduke—then he stopped, ashamed. That was the way he talked to the fellows at school. He mustn’t speak to such a beautiful lady that way. So—“How do you do?” he corrected himself.

But she only smiled and said—what do you think?

“Llo, little boy”—just like himself. That seemed to set her singing again:

“Low and high,
In the lake or the sky;
High and low,
In the crystal snow.”
Then she stopped.

“Is there any more to it?” asked Marmaduke. “Oh, yes, one could go on forever”

“On the church spire,
Or in the fire;
On the wavelet’s tip,
Or the mast of a ship;
In the shining gem
Over Bethlehem;
In the little cradle,
With the ox in the stable,
A baby fair
It was brightest there!”

“Now is that all of it?” Marmaduke asked her.

“Oh, there’s lots more, but I’ll sing just the last part for tonight”—and she told him the end:

“And in Mother’s eyes,
Just as bright as the skies.”

Marmaduke thought she was right in the last part of the song, anyway. Of course, he didn’t understand exactly what it was all about, but it was a very pretty song, and he would think it over in the morning. But then his curiosity got the better of him.

“What did you come down here for?”

“Oh, I saw the light in your window,” she explained, “and I thought maybe it was a little lost star. You see, we have to look out for them. When we do find a star that has lost its way we take it back—”

“Do you stick it up there with a pin?”

This question seemed to strike her as very amusing, and she laughed. And when she laughed it sounded like church bells far, far off, or the voice of the Brook.

“Oh, no,” she said as soon as she could speak. “Do I look as if I could be stuck up there by a pin?”

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"No-o-o, but what do you do? Just float around—or swim?"

"Well, that's the way you Earth people would put it—but we have another word for it."

"What is the word?"

She shook her head.

"That I can't tell you, for you'd never understand it, but it's a very pretty word."

Marmaduke sighed.

"I'd like to know it," he said, "but I suppose I can't."

And the Star Lady answered,—

"Not now, perhaps some day."

"Do you do anything else besides hunting for little lost stars?"

"Oh, yes," she said, coming a trifle nearer his bed, "sometimes we find little stars on earth that have never been in the sky, and they shine so very brightly that we take them up there, too."

"What kind of stars?"

"Would you like to see them?"

"You bet I would," Marmaduke started to say, then stopped. That sounded rather rude. Still she didn't reprove him; she didn't seem to mind it a bit. There was something very homelike about her, for all she was so radiant and bright.

"I understand perfectly," she assured him, "but we must be off before daylight." Then she turned to the bureau.

"Take the Little Blue Lamp with you, then you'll seem like a star, too."

Now long ago Marmaduke had made another trip to the skies, to see The Old Man in the Moon, but that journey was never like this. This was so much more beautiful.

He didn't feel as if he were walking or riding, just rising in the air with one hand clasped in the fingers of the Star Lady, the other around the little lamp.

Marmaduke wondered if all the people would look up and see his little light.

"Perhaps they can see just the light and not me," he said to himself, "and that would be just right."

They rose up over the trees, then over the brook, and he saw himself shining in the brook. It looked as if his twin were lying there in the water, and he laughed out loud—that is he thought he did. But he found he wasn't making any sound. Instead of words, sparkles seemed to come from his mouth, like the twinkles of a star.

He asked the Star Lady about that. It was very funny, but now that they were getting up in the clouds he couldn't hear his own voice and she couldn't hear it, either, but they understood each other just the same.

"When a star twinkles, it is laughing," she explained, and it all seemed very clear to him.

Now they passed through great clouds. When they rose above them he looked down. They seemed like white islands in a clear blue sea. And the sky was the sea. It wasn't like water, but just as cool, and the earth, and the towns, and the trees lay like places buried at the bottom of the ocean.

He tried to step on a cloud, and he couldn't feel anything at all under him, yet it didn't

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give way—he could sit down on it. He did lie down for a little while, it felt so soft and nice, but the Star Lady made him get up.

“We must hurry, for way over there I see the Sun. He’s stirring in his sleep, and when he gets up and washes his face—”

“Does he wash his face?” interrupted Marmaduke, “just like real people?”

“Yes, he rubs cloud lather all over it, and then he dips his face in the bowl of the ocean.”

“How does he dry it?”

“Oh, the morning wind does that,” she replied, smiling at such a parade of questions, “but let’s go before he starts to wash up, for I must show you all the star fields. It’s only a few steps up.”

“But I don’t see any steps,” exclaimed the little boy.

She smiled.

“Don’t you?” she said, “you’ve been climbing them all the time.”

“But it’s such a long way to come, and my legs don’t feel a bit tired,” he persisted, a little doubtfully.

“Oh, no one ever gets tired in the skies,” she explained, “we never get tired and we never grow old.”

“Do you live forever ‘n ever?”

“Yes, forever,” she answered gently, “but there are the fields.”

Before them and all around them they stretched—as far as his eyes could see, and as far as they could have seen if he had had the biggest telescope in the world.

They were not green like those of Earth, but blue—blue as if each blade of grass were a blade of violet. And each field was thickly planted with bright little gleams like fireflies, winking, winking through the night.

And here and there was a great big star, like the Star Lady herself, walking about—no, it wasn’t that—they were floating about the meadows. How Marmaduke wished he knew the word she had said they used in the skies for “walking”

“Are they stars or angels?” he asked her.

“Yes and no,” she replied. Her answer was very strange, but she wouldn’t explain it.

Suddenly Marmaduke thought of a question he had often asked people down on Earth. He could put it to the Star Lady and see if she would give the same answer as Mother. It was an old, old question that little children have asked ever since the world began.

“Who made the stars?” it was.

“God,” she answered gently, “at least He made the big ones—but not the little ones.”

“And who made them?”

“Oh, the people on earth. Perhaps you made a few yourself,” she added.

“Me? How ever could I make stars?” And he stared at her in wonder.

“Oh, yes you can. Do you see those little ones there? They are the kind deeds people do on Earth. We go looking for them, and we can find them easily, for they shine out even in the darkest woods and the darkest streets. Then we put them up here. Look hard and per-

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haps you can find some you recognize."

Marmaduke did look hard. There was one near him. It was very little, but, somehow, as he looked he seemed to know it.

He went very near it. It twinkled like a real star, yet it was round as a bubble. And in it, just as in a soap bubble, he saw a picture.

The Star Lady was looking at him with an amused smile.

"What do you see?" she asked.

Yes, sure enough, there was a picture in it, a little faint, but he could make it out a horse and a bright red cart and on the seat a boy with crutches.

"Why it's Little Geeup and Johnny Cricket!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, it's the picture of the time you took him for a ride," she answered. "I saw you do it, and I went down to Earth, and took that kind, bright little star deed, and planted it here in this very same field."

"Oh, oh!" It was all he could say, it was so wonderful.

Then he saw another field not far away that was full of particularly bright stars.

"I think I know those," he told the Star Lady, "they seem like friends."

"Do they? No wonder!"

Then she looked at him, her head on one side, and a smile in her eyes.

"I won't tell you what they are. I'm going to let you tell me."

"Oh, I know, I know," he cried, "they're Mother's kind deeds—all she's done for me and Jehosophat and Hepzebah—and, oh, how many there are!" he added.

"Yes indeed, my dear. You never guessed there were so many, did you?"

Marmaduke grew very solemn as he replied,—

"But I won't forget now ever."

From where they stood, the great blue fields rose into a hill. And on the top of the hill was a beautiful star, the largest of all.

"And what is that?" the little boy asked his new friend.

"The star that shone over the cradle in Bethlehem."

He begged her to let him go nearer, but she shook her head.

"Not tonight. Someday you'll see it very clearly."

He was disappointed at that.

"When can I?" he asked.

"I do not know—but someday you and all in the world will see it, when the Earth people are kind to each other—not once in a while, but every day—all the while—"

"Anyway," said Marmaduke, "I don't think that star is any prettier than Mother's. It's bigger but not prettier."

"No, dear," she said, "not any more beautiful—it's all the same light. But the Sun is putting on his gold shoes. Look—over there," she added, "you can see the reflection."

And sure enough, as Marmaduke looked over to the East, the edge of the sky was turning to gold.

"You'll have to say goodbye now," the Star Lady told him, not sadly but gently, "to all the

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stars and to me. But before you go, listen, and you'll hear them all singing together. They always do, in the morning before the Sun comes. There, can you hear it?"

He listened, oh, so hard, but all he could hear was music like sleigh bells that were very far away.

"I hear something," he told her, "but it isn't clear. It sounds so far, far off."

"Someday you'll hear that clearly, too," she said, then turned. "Goodbye, my dear, I'll look out for your stars again, all the little ones you make each day. Don't forget."

And as he felt himself sinking, he saw the Star Lady waving at him from above, and he was sure she was singing again:

"Light, light

By day or night;

Stars in the skies,

Stars in the eyes."

Again he opened his. There was the Blue Fairy Light winking at him—and his mother's hand was on his forehead. How good it felt! And how cool her voice sounded!

"Was it a nice dream, dear?" she asked him. He didn't answer that question. Instead he said shyly,

"Mother—"

"Yes, dear?"

"Your eyes are like—"

"Like what, my dear little boy?"

"Like stars," he finished drowsily, then fell asleep, her hand still on his forehead.