

SEVEN O'CLOCK STORIES



Sixteenth Night: Sloshin'



Of course Marmaduke grew well again, and back from Uncle Roger's came Jehosophat and Hepzebiah. They came back in the old creaking buckboard with Methuselah the old, old white horse, and the Toyman.

No sooner had they jumped to the ground than Marmaduke asked, very proudly:

"Where do you think I've been?"

"You've been sick."

Marmaduke shook his head.

"That's not what I mean," he said. "I've been to see the Old Man-in-the-Moon."

"Now you're telling stories" jeered Jehosophat. "You've just been in bed all the time."

"I'm not telling any stories," said his brother stoutly. "I tell you, I have been to visit the Old Man-in-the-Moon."

But Jehosophat wouldn't believe him.

"That's a whopper," said he.

Marmaduke turned to his friend, the Toyman.

"I have been there, haven't I?"

"Where?" said the Toyman.

"To see the Old Man-in-the-Moon."

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“Of course you have,” his good old chum replied, “and a heap of wonderful things you saw.”

The Toyman never laughed at the wonderful things they had done, nor at the marvellous things they had seen—no never, for he understood little children.

Now Jehosophat had to believe him. He asked lots of questions, while Hepzebiah listened, her eyes growing as round as big peppermint drops.

So Marmaduke showed them the little red and blue sleigh, and told them all about the little driver, Jack Frost. And he didn't forget about old Black-eyed Susan's great jump, nor the gold pennies, either.

Jehosophat felt just a little jealous. Perhaps that is why he was naughty that day.

And this is how it all happened:

It was in the afternoon. Jehosophat was coming home from the schoolhouse, which was up the road about a mile, a long way from the White-House-with-the-Green-Blinds where the three happy children lived.

With him walked four of his friends—Sophy Soapstone and Sammy Soapstone, who lived on the farm by the Old Canal; Lizzie Fizzletree, who lived on the turnpike; and Fatty Hamm, who lived by the river road.

Sammy Soapstone had blue eyes and tow hair which stood up straight on his head. It was as stiff as the curry comb with which the Toyman brushed the horses. Sophy Soapstone had blue eyes, too, and two neat little pigtails down her back.

But Lizzie Fizzletree had black eyes and hair that stuck out in all directions. She had more safety-pins on her dress than a neat little girl should ever have. And her stockings were forever coming down.

Fatty Hamm was so round and so plump that he looked as if he had pillows under his clothes. And though he was only twelve he had two chins. Every once in a while he would eat so much that a button would pop off.

He was eating apples now.

One, two, three, four, five, he ate. He did not offer one to his friends, not even the core!

Another apple he took. That made six!

Pop went a button and—splash—it landed in a puddle of brown water.

For three days it had rained, washing the white snow away. The ruts in the road were full of these puddles, nice and brown and inviting.

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Sammy’s eyes and Jehosophat’s eyes followed the button as it landed in the water, making little rings which grew larger all the time.

“Let’s slosh,” said Sammy.

“Let’s!” cried Lizzie Fizzletree, “it’s lots of fun, sloshin’.”

Into a big puddle marched Sammy Soapstone, and after him marched Lizzie and Sophy, and at the end of the procession waddled Fatty.

“Slop, slosh, slop, slosh,” they went through puddle after puddle.

Glorious fun it was. Showers of spray flew all over the road.

But Jehosophat walked on ahead in the middle of the road. Hadn’t his mother told him, particularly, not to get his feet wet?

“Come on in, it’s fine!” they all shouted at Jehosophat.

“Aw, come on!” Sammy Soapstone repeated, and Fatty called:

“Fraidcat!”

At that Jehosophat turned around. He just couldn’t stand being called “fraidcat.”

So slosh, slosh, into the biggest brown puddle he could find he went.

Slosh, slop, slop, slosh!

Over his rubber tops went the water. Fine and cool it felt.

Splash went the water over the road. And he kicked it over Fatty till the round fat legs were drenched too.

Then all the boys bent over the puddle, and scooped up great handfuls of water, and threw them over each other.

It was a great battle. And when it was finished and they were soaked to the skin, they splashed up the road, shouting and singing.

I guess they went into every last puddle between the schoolhouse and the White-House-with-the-Green-Blinds by the side of the road.

They had reached it now.

All-of-a-sudden Jehosophat felt very funny near the pit of his stomach. Something was sure to happen now.

In front of the house marched Mr. Stuckup, the Turkey. His chest was stuck out and his tail feathers were spread out too, like a great big fan. He was having a lovely parade all by himself.

“Rubber, rubber, rubber,” he gobbled.

Jehosophat looked down at his feet. He felt guilty—but he thought it was very mean of Mr. Stuckup to call attention to his wet rubbers that way.

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“Keep quiet,” Jehosophat shouted. “You don’t need to tell on me!”

“Rubber, rubber, rubber,” gobbled Mr. Stuckup just the same.

Jehosophat kicked at him with his wet feet, and tried to grab the fat red nose that hung down over the turkey’s beak.

At that old Mr. Stuckup’s feathers ruffled in anger, and he hurried off, still gobbling “rubber, rubber, rubber,” as loud as he could.

Around the house sneaked Jehosophat, trying hard not to be seen.

Half-way to the back door, who should he meet but a procession of the Foolish White Geese.

By this time Jehosophat was not only wet clear through, he was angry clear through too, so he kicked at them.

They stretched out their long white necks and called:

“Hiss! Hiss! Hissssssss!!”

They might be very foolish, these White Geese, but they were sensible enough to know that Jehosophat ought to have been ashamed of himself that afternoon.

To make matters worse, the sun was shining now. He sparkled so brightly on the Gold Rooster on the top of the barn, that Father Wyandotte flapped his wings and cried to all the world:

“Look, look, look, look! You’re going to get it—hurroo!”

And all the White Wyandottes took up the cry:

“Cut, cut, cut, cut, cut—you’ll get it.”

Jehosophat wished he were as small as Hop-o’-my-Thumb, so that he could creep through the keyhole and never be seen at all.

But he had one friend left—little Wienerwurst, who frisked up to him just then, wagging his tail. He didn’t scold Jehosophat at all, partly because he was so often up to mischief himself. And then little Wienerwurst always stuck by his friends anyway.

For a while nothing more happened, and Jehosophat tiptoed in at the back door. Mother was nowhere to be seen, so over the floor he sneaked.

At every step the water oozed out and slop, splosh, slop, splosh, still went his shoes.

But he reached his room safely, then quickly he rummaged in the drawers of the bureau.

Quiet as a mouse he took off his wet clothes, and put them in the darkest

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corner of the big closet. Quiet as a mouse he drew on the clean dry ones.

But someone was calling:

“Jehosophat—Je-hos’-o-phat !”

No answer made he.

“Jehosophat—Je-hos’-o-phat !”

No longer could he hide. So, making his face look as bold and as innocent as possible, he walked into the dining-room.

But somehow, though he tried to look innocent, I guess he really looked guilty.

“Jehosophat Green, what have you been doing?” asked Mother. Her eyes were almost always kind but they were a little stern just then.

Jehosophat tried another look on his face, for you can try different looks on your face just as you try different hats on your head. This time he tried the one that folks call “unconcern,” a look as if he had no troubles at all, as if he had nothing to hide.

“Aw, just playin’,” he answered his mother.

Then his mother asked a very strange question:

“Where’s the party?”

Jehosophat was surprised. “Party” sounded fine.

“What party, Mother?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” his mother replied. “I just thought you were dressed up for one.”

And he looked down at his clean suit and his Sunday best shoes. And from out the corner of his eye he saw wet places on the floor and muddy tracks, about as big as his feet.

No answer now had Jehosophat. He guessed he would go into the parlour. So he sat down at the marble-topped table, and looked at the picture book which Uncle Roger had given him. It was full of great white ships sailing the blue sea.

For a moment he almost forgot all his troubles, so interested was he in looking at those great ships and their sails and all the wonderful fish.

Then suddenly he remembered.

He looked out through the door into the dining-room.

Mother wasn’t saying anything. She was just busy. That was all.

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But had she forgotten?

Somehow Jehosophat did not like the sad look on her face.

He went and shut the door. He thought he would feel more comfortable if he couldn’t see Mother’s eyes. Then he sat down to look at the picture book again. But he felt more miserable than ever.

Bang! he shut the book too. It was very strange. The things that usually made him so happy weren’t any fun at all just then.

Then he looked up at the mantel.

Above it hung a great picture. There was a man in a cocked hat. He had on a fine uniform and he rode a tall white horse. Jehosophat knew very well who that was. It would be his birthday tomorrow—George Washington’s birthday. The teacher had told them all about it that very afternoon.

She had told them a story, too, about a hatchet and a cherry tree—and—a lie!

The man on the horse looked down from the picture. The eyes were very stern.

A lie!

Yes, that was just what he had told to Mother. He had told a lie, and acted a lie.

Though there was no one else in the room but the great man in the big picture, Jehosophat’s cheeks grew very red. A lump came into his throat.

Now he never could be president nor have a sword—and ride a big white horse—and call “Forward March” to the whole army. No—never!

To the window he went, and pressed his nose against the pane. The clouds were grey. It all seemed very dark and not at all cheerful as the world ought to be.

Once more he looked up at the picture.

And as he looked at the eyes of the man in the picture, they told him to do something.

He decided to do it. And as soon as he decided he felt better—not all better—but better.

And out into the dining-room he marched. He had to close his fists tight, for it is very hard sometimes to tell people you’ve done wrong to them, especially if they are people you love.

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“Mother,” he said—not very loud.

She looked up.

“Yes?”

“Mother—I——”

He stopped. Mother looked up. She saw his lip tremble a little and wanted to take him in her arms. But she didn't just then. He must tell what he had to tell, first.

“Mother—I told a lie—I got my feet wet—sloshin'—and I said I was playin' when I changed my clothes—an' I'm sorry an'—an'—I'll never do it again.”

Then Mother did take him in her arms and she kissed him and hugged him too.

“Well—I love my little boy all the more for this. It was very wrong to disobey, worse still to tell a lie. But it was hard to tell me your own self about it and you were brave.”

So she kissed him. And her eyes weren't sad any more.