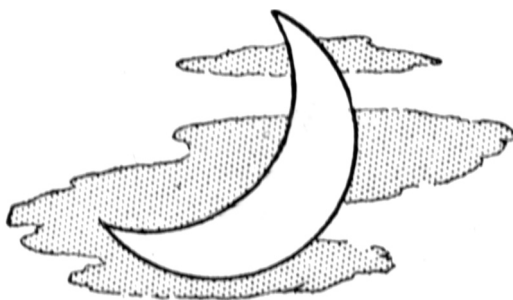


SEVEN O'CLOCK STORIES



Fifteenth Night: Jack Frost and the Man-in-the-Moon



Once, twice, thrice nodded Marmaduke's head.

The red flames of the fire kept dancing, dancing all the time. Very bright looked the little sleigh at the foot of the bed, very brave the tiny reindeer.

But look! Something moved—just a little.

The “nigh” little reindeer was stamping his foot and tossing his antlers.

And the other little reindeer tossed his horns and stamped his foot too.

On their backs the sleigh-bells jingled, merrily like fairy bells.

The red and blue sleigh moved a little—just a little.

It began to slide slowly, over the comforter.

Marmaduke was worried. He didn't want the pretty sleigh and the reindeer to run away. He might never see them again.

“Wait!” he shouted.

“Whoa—you villains!” It was a strange little voice that ordered the reindeer.

The red and blue sleigh stopped short.

Marmaduke rubbed his eyes.

The strange little voice spoke again.

“Jump in,” it said.

And there in the front seat of the toy sleigh sat a funny little chap, about as big as the Toyman's thumb—no bigger. He wore a pointed cap that shone

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like tinsel on a Christmas tree. He wore a white coat that sparkled too.

“Who are you?” asked the little sick boy. “That’s my sleigh. You shan’t run off with it.”

And the funny voice under the white cap answered.

“Jump in, then, and take a ride.”

“Tell me who you are, first,” Marmaduke insisted.

“My name’s Jack.”

“Jack what?”

“Jack Frost—you ought to know that !”

Tinkle, tinkle went the bells The reindeer lifted their hoofs higher and pawed at the comforter. They shook their antlers impatiently. The little driver jumped up and down in the seat as if he were sitting on pins and needles.

More worried than ever was Marmaduke.

“How can I get in that sleigh?” he asked the imp of a stranger. “I’m too big.”

The little chap only chuckled. It was a very mischievous chuckle. Then he said:

“Take a good look at yourself.”

Marmaduke did.

My, how he had shrunk! He was no bigger than a brownie, no bigger himself than the Toyman’s thumb.

“How did that happen?” he said,

“Oh, the dream fairy did that,” said Jack. “She likes to play tricks on people. It’s lots of fun. But shake a leg, shake a leg!”

With that he shook the reins himself, and the bells jingled again, and the reindeer grew more eager every second, snorting impatiently.

Once more Marmaduke looked down at himself. No, his eyes had made no mistake. He was small enough now to sit on that little red seat with the tiny driver.

So he popped out from the covers. The folds of the blanket looked as big as mountains, the lumps of the comforter as high as the hills. Over them he scrambled and he sprawled till he reached the little red and blue sleigh.

Then he jumped in.

The driver could be very impudent, but he took good care of Marmaduke

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just the same, for the boy had been very sick and might catch cold. So Jack pulled the white robe over his passenger’s knees, and tucked him in all snug and warm.

“Gee-up, gee-up!” he called to the tiny reindeer.

Marmaduke was frightened. What a horrible crash there would be when they slid from the high bed to the floor.

But nothing like that happened at all. Away off the bed, over the bright rag carpet, and past the red fire, safely and swiftly they trotted. Below the window they paused. Pretty silver ferns and trees covered the panes and sparkled in the firelight. The window was closed, but that did not matter at all.

“Up with you!” yelled Jack Frost.

Slowly, as if by magic, up went the window sash! Over the sill galloped the reindeer. And after them ran the toy sleigh with Jack Frost and Marmaduke on the red seat.

Over the porch, too, they went.

Then something did happen.

“Now look at yourself,” said Jack Frost, cracking his whip.

Marmaduke did not hear him at first. He was admiring that whip. It was only a long icicle, and all Jack had to do was to touch the reindeer with its point to make them run faster and faster.

“Look at yourself,” he repeated.

Marmaduke obeyed.

“Why, I’m as big as I used to be!”

Jack laughed and replied:

“The dream fairy does love to play tricks on folks!”

Yes, the sleigh had grown as large as his father’s sleigh; the reindeer as big as Teddy, the buckskin horse. The tossing horns were as high as the reindeer’s in the Zoo, and Jack Frost was as big as Jehosophat now.

“I’m sorry that Jehosophat and Hepzebiah are not along,” said Marmaduke to himself, “they’re going to miss some fun”

He looked ahead through the trees Up over the hill the snow path stretched—up to the dark blue sky and the stars. Millions of them there were and they were all twinkle-winking at him. And the Old Man-in-the-Moon, just over the hill, kept winking at him too.

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Jack Frost turned to Marmaduke.

“Where would you like to go most?”

Marmaduke didn't need to think, he had his answer all ready.

“I'd like to visit the Old Man-in-the Moon.”

“It's a bit of a drive,” replied Jack, “but Old Yellow Horns and Prancing Hoof are fast goers. Gee-up! Gee-up!” he shouted at them, touching their flanks with the icicle whip. So fast they went they scarcely seemed to touch the snow, and on up the hill they rode towards the laughing Man-in-the-Moon.

Then suddenly there came such a barking, a yelping, a neighing, a mooing, a clucking, a gobbling, a squealing, a squawling, as you never heard before.

Around jerked Marmaduke's head.

There, behind the sleigh, running and leaping and paddling and waddling and frisking and scampering came a strange procession. There were Rover and Brownie and little Wienerwurst, Teddy and Methusaleh and all the horses, Primrose, Daisy, Buttercup, Black-Eyed Susan and all the cows. He could see their tongues hanging out—it was so hard to keep up with the dogs and the horses.

“Moo—moo, slow—slow!” called the poor cows.

And behind them ambled the sheep and the curley-tailed pigs; waddled the ducks and the geese; Miss Crosspatch, the Guinea Hen, and Mr. Stuckup, the turkey; and, at the very end, all of the White Wyandottes, the fathers and the mothers, and the little yellow children, and their grandfathers and grandmothers, and all their uncles and aunts, and their cousins, first, second, and third—every last one of them.

My—what a fuss and a clatter they made!

There was a long long line of them, stretching down the hill and down the white road over the snow.

Marmaduke laughed and exclaimed to Jack Frost:

“Why, they look just like the procession of the animals when they came out of the Ark.”

“Yes, I remember them,” replied Jack. “And Old Noah too. I used to pinch their ears and pull their tails o' nights.”

Marmaduke looked surprised.

“You! Why, that was hundreds of years ago! You can't be as old as all that.”

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But Jack only smiled a superior smile

“Sure I am. Why I’m as old as the world!”

“Old as that Man-in-the-Moon?” continued Marmaduke, and the odd little fellow replied:

“Just as old.”

Marmaduke looked up at the moon sailing far above them. And the old man, sitting there on the moon-mountain, nodded as much as to say that Jack was quite right.

Now the sleigh reached the top of the hill just where it touches the sky.

Surely there they would stop.

But no—

“This sleigh can run on air just as well as on snow,” the odd little driver explained.

Another touch of the icicle whip, a jingle of bells, a snort from the reindeer, and they were off—off through the air towards the sailing moon.

Marmaduke was so interested in looking up that he didn’t see little Wienerwurst run ahead of all the animals. That doggie beat them all to the top of the hill. And when he came to the top he just jumped out in the air and landed safe on the runner of the sleigh, and curled up there and hid and didn’t make any noise.

It was very clear high up in the air, and Marmaduke looked down.

The houses had shrivelled all up. As small as Wienerwurst’s own little house they seemed. And the trees were as small as plants in the garden.

He looked down again. The earth was far below them.

By the white steeple of the church they flew. In the steeple was a little window. The bell-rope hung out. Jack jerked it as they went past.

”Ding, dong—

Something’s wrong .”

So spoke the deep voice of the old bell. He was a hundred years old, and such strange things had never happened in his life before.

And the minister threw up his window and stuck his head out. And the minister’s wife stuck her head, in her nightcap, out of the window, too. And the sexton ran out in the snow, in his shirt-tail, to see what was the matter.

And all the other people, in the farmhouses and in the town houses, threw up their windows or ran out of doors to see where the fire was.

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Then, after looking all around the houses and barns and the haystacks, they looked up at the sky and saw Marmaduke in the sleigh, racing towards the moon

They were very funny, like little toy people, all looking up and pointing at the sky and all shouting at once.

But Marmaduke didn’t care—he was having the time of his life!

Then a still stranger and funnier sight he saw,—all the animals on the top of the hill—the horses, the dogs, the cows, the sheep, the pigs, the ducks, the geese, the turkeys, and the White Wyandottes, all sitting on their haunches and barking or neighing or howling or squawking at Marmaduke, as on—up and up—he went, a-sailing through the sky.

But he missed his little pet doggie. Where could he be?

He was worried about that until all of a sudden he heard a little bark and looked behind, and there on the red runner, hanging on for dear life, was little Wienerwurst. Marmaduke reached down, and picked him up by the scruff of his neck, and set him on his lap, under the robe, so that he wouldn’t catch cold.

So Wienerwurst too had the time of his life, and his little pink tongue hung out in delight as they raced toward the moon.

They hadn’t gone more than a hundred miles or so, when something strange floated past them—a cloud all puffy and soft and white, like the floating islands in the puddings Mother makes.

The reindeer nearly ran into it. That would have been too bad, for the sleigh would have torn it in two. And as they passed, Marmaduke saw little baby angels lying there, curled up in the cloud, fast asleep, with their wings folded.

A whole fleet of the clouds passed by and there was only clear air ahead of them, they thought, but no!

“Bang.” They had bunked into something high up in the sky.

“Very careless,” said Jack Frost, as he pulled on the reins.

It was very bright, and Marmaduke blinked hard.

Ahead of them lay another island, but this one was round and flat and shiny like a gold shield, with a little hill in the centre. And there upon the hill sat a jolly old man, round and fat, with a pipe in his mouth and a sack on his back.

“Hello, old Top!” said Jack Frost.

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“Good evening, you mischief-maker,” replied the Man-in-the-Moon. “What are you up to now?”

“Oh, I’ve brought one of the little earth children to see you. This is Marmaduke Green. He’s been sick, so I thought I’d give him a ride.”

“Oh, ho! That’s it. You do do someone a good turn now and then, after all.”

Then the old man turned to Marmaduke.

“Howdy,” he said, “I hope you’ll get better very soon.”

“Thank you,” replied Marmaduke politely. He was so well brought up that he didn’t forget his manners, even up high in the sky.

“Well, here’s something to play with when you get back to earth,” said the Old Man-in-the-Moon. And he reached his hand inside the sack on his back, and pulled out a fistful of bright gold pennies—oh, such a lot of them!

Marmaduke reached for them. But alas! he was in too much of a hurry, and they spilled out of his hand and rolled right over the edge of the moon. Down, down, down, through the sky they dropped, past the stars and the clouds, down, down, down to the earth.

There were all the animals still, on the top of the hill, looking up at the moon. And one of the bright pennies landed on Black-eyed Susan’s nose. She was a timid old cow and she was startled. And she was still more frightened at the howling, the barking, the squawking, which the animals set up, one and all.

So frightened was she that she jumped. So hard did she jump that she leaped way over the hill and over the clouds and the stars.

“There’s that critter again,” complained the Man-in-the-Moon.

On, with her tail spread out behind her, and her legs sprawling in the sky, came old Black-eyed Susan, straight towards them. Jack Frost and Marmaduke jumped back; the Old Man-in-the-Moon moved a little too. They were afraid she would land on their toes.

But she didn’t.

“She’s still pretty chipper,” observed the old man. “That’s a great jump. Most beats the record”

So it did, for she sailed right over them, coming down on the other side of the moon, hitting one poor little star on the way with her hoof, and putting out its light entirely.

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And down, down old Susan fell till she hit the earth and lay there, panting and mooing so loud that the people on earth thought it was thunder, and shut their windows tight for fear of the rain.

“Well!” said the Old Man-in-the-Moon, blowing clouds of smoke from his pipe, “that’s over. Now here’s some more pennies. Be careful this time,” he warned him.

And from his sack he drew forth another great handful of gold pennies. How they did shine! But as Marmaduke reached for them, Jack Frost jiggled his elbow with his icicle whip—and again they rolled over the edge of the moon.

And again Marmaduke was too eager. He ran after them, and Wienerwurst ran too, and when they reached the edge they couldn’t stop themselves at all.

They were falling, down, down through the sky. A hundred somersaults they turned. Marmaduke tried to hold on to a cloud, but his hands went right through it. He tried to hold on to the stars, but he missed every one.

Then suddenly—bang went his head against the church steeple—and all the stars danced———

Then he woke.

He looked around. Why-he was sitting up in the bed, his very own bed, by the red fire!

It was just a trick of the dream fairy’s, after all.

But it was all right, for at the foot of the bed rested the little red and blue sleigh and the tiny reindeer, just as still as still could be.

And at the side of the bed stood Father and Mother—and the Toyman.

They seemed very happy.