

SEVEN O'CLOCK STORIES



Twentieth Night: The Lions of the North Wind



By the fire sat the Toyman.

He must have been seeing things in the flames, for he kept looking, looking all the time.

He was all alone, for Father and Mother Green had gone to town to see a fine wedding. It was not often that they stayed out so late, but this was a grand event. And they knew the three happy children would be safe in the Toyman's care.

They were all in the next room. Jehosophat and Hepzebiah were sound asleep—but not Marmaduke. He was sitting up, a little bit of a fellow in a big bed.

Outside, old Giant Northwind roared and roared. Now he seemed to be running around and around the house, faster than any train. Now he stopped to knock at the door and bang at the window panes. Now he trampled on the roof, knocking off pieces of slate and a brick from the chimney, which fell, crash, through the glass cover of the little greenhouse.

Marmaduke did not like the sounds cruel Giant Northwind made. And it was very dark in the room. To tell the truth he was just a little bit frightened. But he didn't say anything at all. For the Toyman had told him always to be "game." That was a funny word, but Marmaduke knew what it meant. A

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brave little boy must not cry even if he is afraid.

Still the Giant Northwind kept running round and round the house with great leaps. And the windows creaked, and the trees thumped the house with their branches.

Suppose the Giant should break in and carry him 'way, 'way off!

The door of the next room was open. Through it he could see the bright fire. Higher and higher leaped the flames, as if they wanted to jump up the chimney and join the Northwind in his mad race.

Very comfy and bright looked the fire. Very funny were the shadows on the wall, dancing and bowing to each other and jumping up and down like Jacks-in-the-Box.

One shadow was like a man's, as tall as the ceiling.

Had Giant Northwind gotten in the house at last!

Marmaduke shivered and crept out of bed—and hurried into the next room. He kept as far away from that giant shadow as he could. But he never cried out. He was very brave.

On and on against the wall he tiptoed towards the chair by the fire, where the Toyman sat, thinking his strange thoughts.

The Toyman felt a tug at his sleeve. He looked around. There stood Marmaduke, pointing at the shadow.

That shadow was so big and Marmaduke was so small.

“Don't let him get me!” the little boy cried.

The Toyman reached down and in a second Marmaduke was safe in his arms.

“There's nobody here but me,” said the Toyman.

Loud the Giant Northwind howled and roared, while the flames leaped up the chimney.

“Look there!” cried Marmaduke. “There he is!!”

And again he pointed to the shadow on the wall.

“The Giant Northwind has got in our house!”

But the Toyman only laughed, hugging him tighter.

“That's not old Northwind, that's only my shadow,” he explained.

Then Marmaduke laughed too.

“Tell me a story, Toyman,” he asked, “'bout that ole Giant Northwind.”

“It might scare you,” the Toyman answered.

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Marmaduke only shook his head.

“Nothing makes me scared when I’m here ,” he said. He wasn’t afraid of giants, or ogres, or wild animals, or anything, when he was safe in the Toyman’s arms.

For a while he looked up into his face. The Toyman’s hair stood up, all funny and rough. He was always running his fingers through it. His face had wrinkles like hard seams, and it was as brown as saddle leather from working outdoors. But Marmaduke thought that nowhere in the world was there so kind a face, except his Mother’s.

The Toyman put down his corncob pipe and began:

“Once upon a time, long time ago, before your mother was born, or your grandmother, or your great-grandmother either, there was a King. He was King of all the Winds. And he lived in a great big cave up in a high mountain.”

“Was the mountain as high as the church steeple?” asked Marmaduke.

“Oh, higher than that—as high as a lot of church steeples, stuck one on top of another,” the Toyman explained.

“Sometimes the King of the Winds took a little snooze in his cave, and then everything was quiet. But when he woke up he would go out of his cave, raisin’ ructions all over the world.

“There was a lot of work for him to do, east and west, south and north. He tossed the branches of the trees and made ‘em crack, and he made the waves in the ocean turn somersaults, and blew the wooden ships across the sea, and chased the cloud-ships across the sky.

“And he had a lot of little chores too, like drying the clothes on Mondays, and waving the flags on Fourth of July, and sailing little boy’s kites high in the air.

“When the King of the Winds was a young fellow, it was all great fun. But after a while the trees grew bigger and bigger, and the ships taller and taller, and there were so many clouds that he got very tired. He was getting pretty old and he ached in all of his bones.

“So he said to himself, said he:

“I’ll let the kiddies do the work, and rest for a spell in my cave on the mountains.’

“There were four of ‘em—two boys and two girls—and each had a name, of course. Southwind and Westwind were the girls, Eastwind and Northwind

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the boys, two strapping big fellows.

“So he called his children together and sat in the door of his cave.

“First he took a big pinch o’ snuff. That was a very bad habit folks had in those days.

“Kerchoo ! he sneezed, and blew two big clouds out of the sky.

“Kerchoo !!! he sneezed again, and turned upside down a whole fleet of ships in the ocean.

“Kerchoooooo !!!! he sneezed a third time, and blew off the roofs from all the houses in the city, a hundred miles away.

“When he was all through his sneezing he said to his children:

“‘Get ye out to the four corners of the earth and take up my business.’

“Now for a cane the old King used a tree with the branches pulled off. He picked it up and pointed to the south.

“‘Southwind, you go there.’

“She was a pretty little thing, with blue eyes and roses in her hair. And she answered him sweet as you please, ‘All right, Daddy,’ and out she danced.

“Then with the big tree cane, the old King pointed to the west.

“‘Westwind, there is your place,’ he said.

“A very pretty girl too was Westwind, with kind eyes and a soft smile. Her voice was soft and low, and she answered in a whisper:

“‘Good-bye, Daddy dear.’

“She kissed him on the forehead, and floated away to her new home in the west.

“Then the two boys came before the old King. The big tree cane pointed east.

“‘Get to work over there, Eastwind,’ commanded the old King.

“Now Eastwind was a strong fellow, but he was surly and cross and he didn’t obey very quickly. So his father the King picked up his tree cane in a rage and whacked him across the shins, and out Eastwind ran, crying and yelling till the trees of the forests sobbed too. And he cried so hard that rivers of tears ran from his eyes and over the earth.

“Once more the old King picked up his big tree cane, and said to the eldest of his sons:

“‘Northwind, your home is right here in the North.’

“Bigger even than his brother was Northwind. Strong were his muscles, and

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his whiskers and hair were covered with icicles. When he breathed, millions of snowflakes danced from his mouth.

“Brrrrrrr !! how one shivered when he was around.

“Then the old King’s hand trembled and the big cane dropped to the floor. He laid him down in the cavern and breathed his last. He had been a great King but he was deader than a doornail now.

“So his four children took up his work.

“Up and down the south country wandered Southwind, with her rosebud mouth and golden hair. And wherever she went she scattered posies and violets upon the earth.

“Back and forth over her country floated Westwind with her soft smile and gentle voice. She whispered lullabies to little children, and laid cool hands on sick people’s foreheads. She blew little boy’s kites up ever so high above the church steeple, and tried never to break them. And she blew the white ships gently across the ocean. Folks liked to travel the waters whenever she was about.

“But they didn’t like Eastwind very much. Sometimes he was all right, but usually he was bent on mischief, making trouble for every man Jack. The seas he would tumble about, turn over the ships, and drown the poor sailors. He would call his grey clouds together and they would weep till the rivers were full. Then he would blow the rivers over the banks, and spoil the gardens, and break the bridges, and drown the poor sheep, and all the rest of the animals too.

“But the most cruel of all was Giant Northwind. Where his heart ought to be was a chunk of ice. Sometimes he was pleasant enough, but most often he was hard and unkind. He would breathe on people, and freeze their noses and toeses, and leave many a poor fellow stiff on the snow.

“Northwind grew and grew till he was the biggest giant on earth. Most as tall as a mountain himself was he, and when he raised his arm he could nearly touch the sky. He kept walking up and down the earth, roaring and hollering fit to blow his lungs out. And how he could travel! He could go clear around the world in about a week.

“One fine day he went out for a walk and he saw Mr. Sun riding up high in the sky. Mr. Sun was a strange sort of a chap, all dressed up in gold armour. The gold armour shone so bright you could never see his eyes or his nose or his mouth, when he walked in the sky.

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“Giant Northwind grew very jealous of Mr. Sun. He wanted that fine suit of gold armour, for all he had himself was his long whiskers and his fur coat of snow.

“At Mr. Sun he shook his fist.

“Mr. Sun only laughed at him.

“‘Ho, ho!’ he said, ‘Ho, ho!’ and again ‘Ho, ho!’

“‘Ho, ho! you say,’ mimicked Northwind, very angry, ‘soon you will laugh on the other side of your mouth. I will blow you out and people can’t see your fine suit of gold armour any more.’

“‘Ho, ho!’ Mr. Sun laughed back. ‘Just try it and see. Might as well save your breath.’

“That made Northwind very mad. So he took a deep breath until his chest puffed way out like a big balloon.

“Then he let go. All the hills in the north country shook at that roar.

“And the clouds came hurrying out of the mountains and covered the sky so you couldn’t see the Sun and his fine suit at all.

“‘Ho, ho!’ laughed the Northwind.’ Now you will laugh on the other side of your mouth, Mr. Sun.’

“Then he sat him down in his cave to enjoy himself.

“But what was that!

“There was a little hole in the clouds. Through the chink he saw gold shining. Then more and more gold. In a few moments Mr. Sun was riding up in the sky, as big as life.

“‘Ho, ho!’ said Mr. Sun, ‘who laughs last, laughs best.’

“Then old Giant Northwind grew madder and madder, madder than a hornet, yes, just as mad as Mother Wyandotte when Wienerwurst chased her into the brook.

“He took a deep breath, did Giant Northwind, so deep that he almost burst his lungs. He blew and he puffed and he puffed and he blew till the whole sky was filled with grey clouds. And you couldn’t see Mr. Sun and his fine suit of gold armour at all.

“Then down he would sit in his cave to enjoy himself for a spell, but by and by, sure as shooting, Mr. Sun would come back again.

“So, for a hundred years, Northwind tried to blow out the Sun. But at last he gave it up as a bad job.

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“When he was still a middling young fellow, only about a thousand years old or so, he went walking up and down the earth one night, just after dark.

“He came to a great forest. In it he saw something bright, like a little piece of the Sun. Now he was taller than the tallest tree in the forest, so he got down on his knees to peek between the trunks and see better. People were sitting around the bright little piece of the Sun, and warming their hands, and cooking their supper. Of course it was only a merry fire, but Giant Northwind was sure it was a piece of the Sun that had fallen on the Earth. He had been so busy trying to blow him out of the sky that he hadn't noticed these little fires much before.

“But he had grown very cross as he knelt there, looking through the trees, and he said to himself, said he:

“Ho, ho! That's one of the Sun's children. I'll blow that out anyway.’

“And he took a deep breath and puffed his cheeks out.

“Whurrroooooo ! he breathed on that little piece of the Sun.

“But the little fire just laughed and leaped higher and higher.

“So he took a real deep breath this time, till he filled all his chest, and it stuck way out like the strong man's in the circus.

“Whurrrrrroooooooooooooo !!!! he roared, but the little flames just danced in the air, as bright and as merry as could be.

“The more he blew the bigger grew the fire, and the sooner the people had their suppers.

“Then for years and years the old Giant stamped up and down the Earth, trying to put out those little pieces of the Sun. And he couldn't do it at all. Like their father, the Sun, the little fires just laughed at him.

“At last Northwind said to himself, said he: “I know what I'll do, I'll get me some big grey wolves to put out those fires.’

“So a-hunting he went, up into the biggest forests of the world, so dark that people called them ‘the Forests of Night.’ And they were full of fierce grey wolves.

“With his strong hands he caught a hundred wolves and drove them back to his cave.

“Then one dark night when the people were sitting around their fires, so cozy and nice, he untied the wolves and roared out:

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“Wolves, put out those fires!”

“And the fierce grey wolves ran out of the cavern, and snapped and snarled at the little fires. But they couldn’t put them out. So back they came to the cave, with their tongues hanging out and their tails between their legs.

“‘Good-for-nothings,’ roared Northwind, ‘I’ll get me some tigers.’

“Again he went stalking over the Earth till he reached the great deserts, which the people called ‘the Deserts Without End.’ Here he caught a thousand fierce tigers and drove them back to his cave.

“The next night, while the people were talking and singing around the little fires, he let the tigers loose.

“‘Tigers,’ roared he, ‘put out those fires.’

“They ran out of the cave, making a terrible noise, and they raced up and down the earth, with their sharp teeth gleaming, and their tails lashing. At the fires they snarled, and growled, and roared, and tried to beat out the flames with their paws. But they were only burned for their trouble. And so the tigers too slunk back to the cave, with their heads hanging down and their tails between their legs.

“Once more the Northwind stalked forth and hunted through the highest mountains he could find, so high that people called them ‘the Roof of the World.’ Ten thousand lions he caught, the fiercest in all the Earth. He tied them together by their tails, ten at a time, and drove them back to his cave.

“And he sent them out too.

“‘Lions, put out those fires!’

“Such a terrible roar those lions roared that the whole Earth shook. Through the forests they raced, leaping through the wild tree tops, lashing their tails, and shaking their shaggy manes. And they leaped at the fires, but they couldn’t do any better. Those big lions just couldn’t put the little fires out.

“Beside himself with rage was old Northwind now. So he sent them all out, wolves and tigers and lions wild, and he rushed on at their head.

“But never, never can they put the little fires out, so you needn’t worry at all.”

The Toyman stopped and Marmaduke listened.

“Hark!”

Yes, there were the grey wolves now, howling down the chimney. There were

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the wild tigers, snarling at the window panes and leaping at the door.

Hark! How the knobs rattled!

And there were the wild lions, rushing and roaring through the tree-tops.

And round and round and round the house raced old Giant Northwind himself.

But all the while, in the fireplace the little red flames danced merrily, never afraid at all.

Marmaduke jumped. Something was whining and scratching at the door.

Was it a wolf?

The voice he heard was too small and weak.

He knew who that was.

"Toyman," he shouted, "that's my little pet doggie, out in the cold. Those bad wolves an' tigers an' lions 'll eat him up."

So they ran to the door, the Toyman and little Marmaduke. And he wasn't afraid at all. And they let little Wienerwurst in, and saved him from the grey wolves and the wild tigers and the fierce lions of the Northwind.

Little Wienerwurst barked happily and curled himself up by their feet, in front of the warm fire.

After that Marmaduke spoke only once before he fell asleep.

"You never had any little boys, did you, Toyman?"

On the Toyman's face was a funny look as he answered:

"No, little feller, I never had any little boys."

Marmaduke reached up his hand and patted the Toyman's rough, kind face.

"Don't worry, Toyman," he said, "I'll be your little boy."

Little Wienerwurst was sound asleep, so Marmaduke just had to fall asleep too, happy and safe in the Toyman's arms, by the little red fire that the wind could never put out.