

GOOD STORIES FOR CHILDREN—By Walt McDougall

*The Story of a Magic Wreath
Which a Boy Found Hid-
den in His Lonely Castle.*

MILTON ALGERNON ROY, Earl of Chittenden, sat in the lonely and almost ruined castle that had belonged to his family for eight hundred years. The castle was, as might have been expected, overrun with rats, mice, cockroaches, spiders and other sorts of bugs too numerous to mention, and needed repairs from top to bottom. His family had been too poor to spend money on anything except horses and dogs for several centuries, therefore everything went from bad to worse.

Earl Milton was only thirteen years old, but these years had been passed in the gloomy old castle, and he seemed, by reason of a sad and down-cast air, to be some years older, for, indeed, he had rarely had any fun since he was born. The lands all about the place were his, but they were so covered with mortgages that you couldn't tell what the soil was composed of.

He could, however, hunt the wild game that ran through the forest, and this was his sole occupation. But he took no pleasure in what most boys would call sport; merely hunting to obtain food for his two feeble old servants. Perhaps most of his real delight was in the companionship of his dog Sandy, a little yellow and white beagle bound who was never so happy as when running, nose down close to the earth, after a frightened rabbit through the tall grass.

Sandy spent all of his time smelling around. Every clump of verdure, every hole, each pile of brush or heap of rock was carefully inspected, and every nook and cranny in the ancient castle—which, you may be sure, was full them—was daily examined lest something had visited it in the meantime. When he struck the trail of the rabbit, ah, then you should have heard the full, ringing, musical bark that sounded! With his long ears sweeping the ground he dashed away, and from time to time uttered that joyful bay as he chased the bunny scurrying through the underbrush. It was great sport for Sandy, but perhaps the rabbit had a different notion about it.

Because he had no money with which to buy powder Milton was obliged to hunt with a bow and arrow, implements of the chase which had for ages hung on the walls of the great, musty hall, and he became very skillful in the use of these old-fashioned weapons, so that he could bring down a deer or a rabbit from a great distance. He went stealing through the misty forest aisles under the ancient oaks that had seen the archers of Robin Hood's time perhaps, creeping softly so that not a twig broke beneath his cautious footfall, and he rarely failed to return to the castle with a burden of game. Often he sat in the underbrush and shot the pheasants as they darted across a sunny opening or secreted himself in a sedge clump by the lonely lake and sent his arrows across the dark water at a duck winging its way along the shore.

He became as skilled in the way of the woods and its inhabitants as an Indian, and he could tread through the forest mazes in the dark like a weasel or a fox and quite as silently. He knew every tree, every rock, even, I think, every plant, for miles around the castle; each footprint in the soil was read by him as you would read a book, and he knew the call of each bird and the droning of every insect. While the sun shone Milton never remained indoors, but when the snows fell and the lakes froze he was compelled to spend many hours in the weary old castle through which the winter winds swept, making both boy and dog to shiver before the great fire on the open hearth.

It was on one of these winter days that he roamed through all the rooms of his dwelling looking into many a closet and chest, hoping to discover some fragments of fur or woolen clothing that had escaped the search of old Sarah and Peter, and this day he continued his investigations until at last he penetrated to a room under the very roof, a vast apartment, where all sorts of antique rubbish had been dumped for centuries, broken, useless weapons, armor, books and pictures.

There in a dark recess he found an iron-bound chest studded with nails and covered with dust, showing that it had remained undisturbed for a long time. Milton eagerly attacked it, and after much effort managed to raise its ponderous lid, when he saw, lying upon a folded garment of pale blue satin of ancient style, a wreath of flowers so fresh and fragrant that they looked as if they had been placed in the chest but yesterday!



MILTON TOSSED THE WREATH TO THE WITCH'S HEAD

wreath upon a nail in the wall and read the story all over again. Strangely enough, the name of the earl whose bride had died was Milton, too, and this made him feel sad, but soon, when he had donned the heavy woolen clothes and the fur-lined coat, and was plowing through the deep snow to the woods followed by Sandy, he forgot all about the ancestor so long turned to dust whose clothes he was wearing, and he whistled merrily.

All that winter he roamed the woods, clad in the clothes of the sixth Earl Chittenden, wandering far outside of his own lands and seeking game in ice-clad forests which he had never explored before.

Here, far from home, he came upon a little hut, from the chimney of which issued a thin spiral of smoke that told of living occupants, but when Milton knocked on the door it was not opened. Turning at last to leave, he suddenly spied a large gray wolf slinking along in the pale bluish shadow cast on the snow by the trees. He raised his bow and fitted an arrow to the string, but the wolf darted away into the dark evergreen growth and vanished. Sandy was on his trail in a moment, but Milton had no desire to see his little hound mangled by a ravenous wolf, so he whistled him back at once, much against Sandy's will, you may be sure.

He returned home, but early the next morning went again to the little hut, and, finding its door still closed and receiving no answer to his knock, he hid himself in the forest near-by to watch. Soon he saw the same shaggy, gaunt wolf sneak across the fields and disappear behind the hut. It reappeared in a moment, and while it stood at the door he sent an arrow singing across the snow and into its body, but although his aim was good, the wind carried the shaft slightly to one side, and it struck the animal in the flank. Springing into the air, it uttered a loud, pained howl and dashed away.

He sat still, and in a few minutes saw an old and very ugly woman limping toward the hut. Blood stained the footprints in the snow behind her, and her dress was crimson with blood, also. Milton, seeing that she had been hurt, rose and ran to her. She started in surprise when she saw the handsome boy in the fur coat, but when she saw his bow and arrows a sudden anger seemed to possess her. But he did not notice how she glared at him, for his eyes were upon her bloody skirt.

"You are hurt—wounded!" he cried. "What has happened?"

"Nothing, nothing at all," she snapped, crossly. "I fell against a sharp broken branch of a tree, that's all. I'll be all right in a few minutes. Go away and mind your business!"

A sudden thought smote Milton.

"Was it the wolf?" he asked eagerly. "Did it attack you in the forest?"

"There are no wolves here!" replied the old woman. "At least I have never seen any."

"I shot one just now, but did not kill him!" replied Milton. "He ran away before I could try again."

The old hag glared savagely at him as she opened her door. When it was opened, Milton saw a beautiful girl standing within, a girl with golden hair and violet eyes, who was looking out at him with a pleading as well as a surprised expression. He had seen but few girls, mostly children of peasants on the farms in the neighborhood, and such a wondrously lovely vision as this in such a tumble-down hovel was very startling, therefore he stared with all his eyes until the old woman slammed the door and shut it all out.

Then he returned home to dream about her until little Sandy grew worried at his master's silent and thoughtful air.

Every day, until spring came and released the streams and flowers and painted all the woods with a mingling of tender greens and faint pinks and blues, he haunted the forest's edge, hoping again to see the beautiful girl. Once or twice he knocked on the door, and when it was opened asked the old woman how she was getting on with her wound, but the angry response which he received soon taught him how unwelcome he was, and he never saw the girl, either, so he gave that up and waited for a chance to visit her during the hag's absence.

Hidden in a thick clump of shrubbery he waited day after day until the summer came, but the old woman was as watchful as he and he never caught her going out or coming in, and the door was always closed.

"Now I must tell you about this old woman and

the girl. The hag was a famous witch whose name was Peggotty Swonkers, and she was perhaps the oldest person in all the world, for she had lived since the days of William the Conqueror, days when a witch was an important woman indeed, but, of course, since witches went out of fashion many years ago, she never advertised the fact that she was in that business now, but pretended to be an herb doctor. She was in demand to cure pigs of the colic, cows of the shivers, horses of the staggers and chickens of the pip, but no one ever called upon her to attend to a dog's ills, for, as it is well known, all self-respecting dogs know a witch as soon as they set eyes on one, and every dog immediately flew at Peggotty when she appeared in the streets of the town.

Of course, some people were aware of her awful trade, but as they often had dealings with her they never revealed her secret; but even these people never suspected that she kept a young girl a prisoner in her hut, for when she had callers the girl was put into the cellar. A great black cat kept constant watch at all times, warning her when anybody approached the hut, and guarding the imprisoned girl during her absence—a cat apparently as old as even more hideous and cross than she was herself, a fit companion indeed for the old crone, but a terrible one for a young maiden.

The girl was the daughter of King Chronus, a monarch who ruled a land far in the south, and she had been stolen when a child from the court by Peggotty because the King had issued an order forbidding witches to live in his realms.

She fled with the child, and although the King had offered an immense reward, she had never been found, and to make her capture more difficult the witch had given her an herb which had deprived her of speech, so that she could answer no questions regarding herself if such happened to be asked by curious visitors. The dumb child had grown to be a beauty of such surpassing loveliness that Peggotty had been obliged to hide her in this remote spot for fear of lovers coming and carrying her away; but when the summer came she often allowed her to roam in the dense forest, where only the deer and the rabbits were ever seen, and in order to keep the forest as secluded as possible and to frighten off any stray wanderers, the witch often assumed the shape of a big gray timber wolf, whose red eyes and awful teeth were well calculated to frighten the woodchoppers and artists who sometimes penetrated the deep glades.

But in Milton she recognized a boy who was afraid of nothing and did not hesitate to attack even a wolf. He was resolved to see the girl again. Peggotty was quite sure of that, and yet she was afraid of getting another arrow in her, for the wound she had received in her leg was still very sore, and every time it smarted she groaned and thought of Milton with an awful wofish growl.

She had forgotten many of her witch spells, or else would have turned into a lion or a bear and made an end of him at once; and certainly, had he suspected her of being a witch, he would have been more cautious.

Finally, seeing that the girl was growing pale from confinement, and fearing that she would die and deprive the witch of the pleasure of tormenting her, which was almost her sole pastime. Peggotty decided to rid herself of the watchful lad by playing a trick upon him. Knowing that a boy is always hungry, she made a charmed cake that, if eaten, would promptly change him into a pig, and she laid this cake upon her window sill, hoping and expecting that he would see it and think the girl had made it for him.

But she had never thought of Sandy, whose appetite was far keener than his master's, and who scented the cake in a minute and soon swallowed it with great satisfaction. Instead, however, of turning the dog into a pig, as one might have expected, it merely gave him the power of speech, for it was a spell designed not for dogs, but men, and he ran back to Milton laughing just like a boy. When Milton heard him coming he thought another lad was in the woods, but on seeing Sandy appear he almost fell over in amazement.

"She's a witch," cried Sandy, "and I've eaten some kind of a witch cake that was left on her window sill, probably fixed up for you! I can talk! Ha, ha! What a joke!"

After a while Milton recovered from his surprise, and then they had a long talk. You cannot imagine how queer it seemed at first to hear a dog talking just like another lad, and what fun it was,

too. Sandy, of course, was delighted with his new accomplishment, and rattled away like a mill wheel just to hear his own voice, but, after all, he told Milton many things that he was very glad to hear. In the first place, he was informed that Peggotty was a genuine witch and fully as dangerous as any witch ever seen; and, besides that, he was told just what she had done in the past.

Sandy told him that all witches were very fond of eels, which, however, they rarely can catch, as they fear the water so much that they never approach it, not even in a bath tub. So the first thing to do was to procure some eels.

This is what he did: First he dug a lot of big worms, regular "night walkers," which he tied together with thread in a bunch as large as his fist, and this he fastened to a long string, and when darkness fell he went to the moat which encircled the castle—a deep, stagnant ditch full of eels—and sat down on the bank. Then he threw in his worms, and in a minute a big eel seized the bait, and before he could release his hold on the bunch of thread and worms, Milton jerked him high and dry on the grass. Soon he had a couple of dozen tremendous eels in his basket, and then he went to bed quite satisfied.

It was a warm night, and Milton wished sincerely that his dwelling had been built like modern houses, where one can throw the windows wide open and admit every breath of air; but had this been the case this story might have ended in a vastly different manner, for when he awoke in the morning Sandy revealed a strange fact. The dog was waiting outside of the door when Milton appeared ready to start to Peggotty's hut with the eels.

"Hello," said Milton. "Have you been out all night?"

"Yes, indeed," replied Sandy, with a grin which revealed his glittering white teeth. "I was out all night, and I made a discovery. I caught the old witch peeping in at your window about midnight. She is up to some mischief, I am certain."

"In at my window!" exclaimed Milton in surprise. "My window is thirty feet from the ground! How could she peep in?"

"She was riding a broomstick," replied Sandy, "as I have often seen her doing, although I have never seen her around the castle before. I cannot imagine what she wanted at that hour, but she flew away with a diabolical grin of pleasure upon her face, which revealed the fact that she also had made a discovery which gratified her exceedingly."

"We must discover what it was," said Milton. "I cannot imagine what she could have seen to interest her in my rooms, I am sure, but whatever it was we can only learn from the witch herself. We will go at once to her hut."

He ran into the castle and got his basket of eels, and, with the smiling dog following, hurried away to Peggotty's hovel, where the witch was found smiling, a fact that surprised Milton. She was in very good humor, and when he gave her the eels she asked him to enter her house, where he found the dumb girl spinning at a wheel.

In this old-fashioned occupation she seemed more beautiful than ever, and his heart went out to her. Peggotty said she was her daughter, but that Milton found hard to believe; but as she was speechless the truth could not be learned from her. The witch, delighted at the prospect of a meal, bustled about her hut in hasty preparation for the feast, and after a while Milton asked her to allow him to take the dumb girl for a walk in the forest. The witch reflected for a moment, and then gave permission with a somewhat cloudy brow, but Milton asked no more. They wandered far in the shady woods, and he told her all about himself. But, alas, she could tell him nothing in return.

Then he conceived the notion of teaching her the deaf and dumb alphabet, and promptly proceeded to instruct her. They spent the whole day in wandering, and never thought of the time, although the watchful Sandy had long ago felt the pangs of hunger but was too polite to mention the fact.

On their return the old witch appeared much relieved. Milton asked permission to come again, which Peggotty cheerfully granted, and on the following day he was there early in the morning. Again he walked with Amine, which was the girl's name, but this time they returned early, for he feared to offend the witch. Peggotty was as pleased as before, and asked him many questions about the ancient castle and its history, and all these he answered readily,

*The Undoing of a Witch, the
Rescue of a Princess and
the Finding of Riches.*

hoping to learn her object. Finally she asked him if he ever heard a strange, old tale about a bride who had died on her wedding day.

"Yes," replied Milton. "I read all about it only last winter. I found a parchment in an old chest that told it all."

"What else did you find?" asked Milton, her eyes glowing with eagerness. "There must have been something else!"

Milton told her about the clothes, and when she again asked if nothing more was discovered in the chest, he finally remembered about the wreath of flowers that he had hung on his wall, and which always remained perfectly fresh. Her face changed marvelously and a look of intense relief came over it.

"Oh, I would like very much to see such a wonder!" she cried. "Will you bring it to me and let me inspect it?"

"Certainly. I will bring it to-morrow," replied the boy. Then he said farewell and returned home.

"I'll bet," said Sandy, as he trotted beside his master, "that the wreath is what she is after. All this politeness surely means something! Watch her carefully and don't let her gain any advantage!"

"She is surely up to some mischief," replied the boy. "I can see that in her green eyes every time I look at her; but I think you and I are a match for her, Sandy."

Sandy opened his jaws in a dog's pleased grin and hung out his long pink tongue in a way that showed how he would like to take just one nip out of the old hag. He added:

"I have been sneaking around her hut for hours at night trying to discover something, but she never talks even to her old cat. She was so tickled to hear you say that you would bring her the wreath of flowers that she betrayed undue anxiety to see it. Yes, we will surely defeat her wicked purpose if we can only learn what it is."

The puzzle was too much for either of them, and they went to bed without thinking of anything that Peggotty could do with the wreath; but all night Sandy slept with one eye open and fixed on the window. In the morning they hastened to her with the flowers.

They found her with Amine, outside of the hut, where a big black pot, full of a strange-smelling mixture, was standing over a small fire in the grass. This was some mysterious potion prepared for no good purpose thought the sagacious Sandy, so he kept to windward of its fumes and he cautioned Milton to remember to keep his fingers constantly crossed, lest the witch put a spell upon him. Milton handed the fragrant wreath to Peggotty, and then he noticed that Amine had a somewhat similar wreath upon her golden head. This was so unusual that he looked curiously at her, and the witch said hastily:

"She feared that you would not bring the flowers, so I made a wreath for her. Is it not pretty?"

This uncalled-for explanation caused Milton to be even more cautious, for he was quite sure that Amine had expressed no such desire at all, and he was aware that the witch never did anything to please the girl.

"Yours is a beautiful wreath!" said Peggotty, examining it with great, apparent, interest. "I have never seen anything like it, and what a wonder it is that it remained so fresh and perfect all those ages! No such flowers exist nowadays!"

She was about to return it to Milton, but, as if a sudden thought had occurred to her, she added: "Amine has a wreath upon her head! You must wear this!" She motioned the girl to come to her, and, placing the wreath in her hand, said: "Crown him with the flowers, my child. He loves you!"

The girl was about to place the wreath upon Milton's head, and the witch was trembling with eagerness, bending over them as Milton knelt to receive it, when the boy glanced up and caught the awful gleam in the old hag's eyes! A shiver ran through him, and then, seizing the wreath, he threw it upon Peggotty's own head with a motion so sudden that she could not evade it.

When she felt the flowers about her brow she uttered a frightful yell and tried to tear the wreath away, but it clung like a coiled serpent to her head. In another moment, while her yells rang through the forest and alarmed its wild denizens, she fell to the sward in convulsions of rage and distress. The spectacle was so awful that neither Milton nor Amine could move hand or foot, but stood as if spellbound staring at her.

"I am dying!" she groaned finally. "It's all over! The fatal flowers at last have done for me as they have for others!"

"Then this is what you designed for me!" exclaimed Milton. She groaned again.

"I sent it to your ancestress 800 years ago, and it killed her, and thus it has returned to me! Yes, I meant it for you! Thus I would have destroyed you and regained my poison wreath! I am punished rightly!"

She soon became unable to move, and it was plain that the end was near. Before she died she confessed that she had stolen Amine from King Chronus, and asked Milton to take the Princess back to her home. She also revealed that there was a heap of treasure in her cellar, that she had gathered during her long life, and said that it was theirs if they could drive the black cat away from it. Then she shuddered and died, and in a few minutes there was nothing remaining of her but her clothing, for she had simply turned to dust.

Before they could think of what to do there was a dreadful outcry from the cellar. It was caused by Sandy, who was engaged in dismissing the cat, and so pleasant was the task he became so absorbed in it that he finished the cat before he ceased. Then they went down and carried out the treasure and took it to the castle.

In a few days Milton had purchased everything they needed, and they went to King Chronus. How he received his long-lost daughter you perhaps may have read in the papers, but you may never have heard that he gave half his kingdom, as well as Amine, to Earl Chittenden; but such was the fact, and now there is no greater nobleman in all that country.

Principally the people admire him because he is the only man in all the world who possesses a talking dog, and as there is a great story to be told about Sandy, I'll stop right here and leave the rest for another time.

WALT McDOUGALL.