

GOOD STORIES FOR CHILDREN—By WALT McDOUGALL

The Wonderful Story of an Enchanted House, Talking Cow, Goat and Rooster and Two Very Poor Children

How Good Fortune Came to Them and the Strange Adventures They Had in a Far-Away Land of Mystery



The King and Queen of Hilaria Find Themselves at Their Old Home

A BOY named Alfred Twinks and his sister Bertha lived in a small house near a wood that was dark and full of tangles of undergrowth. As playfellows they had a cow, a goat and a big Shanghai rooster, for there were no other children for miles and miles around. Both of them, however, enjoyed every hour of the long summer days, and managed to have a deal of fun even when the snow lay deep among the gray tree-trunks, although they had no toys nor playthings beyond such natural objects as pine-cones, nuts and other things that one may pick up in the woods.

Few were the books and fewer still the ones that had pictures in them, that these two ever saw, yet they knew how to read what they had and knew them, too, by heart. One of these books was a fairy tale, and well it was that it was such, else Alfred would never have been prepared for the marvelous happenings in which he was concerned, nor would he have known how to act under the circumstances had he not been somewhat versed in the ways of fairy lore and the manner in which magic operates.

Of course he didn't believe in fairies (but Bertha did with all her might), yet he liked to read about them and often caught himself wishing that they really did exist so that a poor boy might catch one or do one a favor, let us say, and be suitably rewarded with the power to make a wish. He had often decided just exactly what he would wish were that power granted. He would wish for a wishing-cap that would grant all other wishes and thus circumvent any fairy that tried to restrict him to one solitary wish.

But in his heart he well knew that no boy nowadays ever attained such felicity, and he really never expected that anything out of the ordinary would ever happen to him or Bertha, but it did.

One day his father and mother went to pay a day's visit to a distant relative and never returned. What happened to them the children did not learn until long afterward, but in the meantime they were left in poverty, although fortunately it was summer and the berries were ripe in the woods. Soon came the landlord, who told them that unless he was paid at once the rent so long overdue they must leave the little cottage, and their cup of woe was filled to overflowing, for where were they to go?

"What shall we do with the poor cow and the goat?" asked Bertha, her tears flowing down on her apron.

"We will have to build a hut in the woods," replied Alfred, solemnly. "But while that may suffice during the summer, what shall we do when the snow comes?"

Just then along came the butcher, who offered them fifteen dollars for the cow and the goat.

Alfred, who knew how difficult it would be to care for the animals now that they had no home, felt that perhaps selling them would open a way out of their difficulties, but before Bertha could express her indignation the cow spoke, to their intense surprise, saying:

"Spare us, and you will be rewarded. Do not sell us or allow us to be killed. There is a way out of your troubles, and if you will follow me I will show you how you may repair your fortunes so that when your parents return they will be proud, as well as grateful."

Before they had recovered from their astonishment she had moved away and the children were following her into the dark forest. She led them into its deepest, gloomiest shades, and just when they were becoming slightly alarmed they emerged upon a sunlit, open space, in the centre of which stood a tumble-down hut, its roof fallen in with the weight of moss and dead leaves and its door hanging by one rusty hinge. The cow stepped before this hovel and said:

"Here in this house is good fortune for us all. I know not where or how it will come to us. I only know that it is here."

After he had made a careful examination of the interior, Alfred said:

"It's a pretty well-shattered house, I think," to which Bertha added:

"And I know it's full of spiders and things."

Thereupon the goat bleated sharply:

"It's the house of good luck! Enter and be prepared!"

"I suppose I could manage to repair it enough to keep out the rain," said Alfred. "Anyway, it seems to be the best we can do."

The repairs were made, and autumn was approaching rapidly, but they did not fear it, for they had laid up provisions against the winter in plenty and spent the time gathering bags of all kinds of nuts in the brown woods, every nook and cranny of which they were familiar with now.

One night Alfred had an experience that made him think that perhaps there might be something in the cow's prediction. Just as darkness fell he came to the edge of the snow-covered clearing, and as he emerged from the wood and looked toward the house he saw a sight that made him halt.

Instead of a house standing there against the tall pines he saw a gigantic face. A great broad face with eyes that gazed out across the snow, sending two red paths toward him, eyes shaded by overhanging brows and with a wide mouth that showed great white teeth in its grin.

He stared for several minutes, then suddenly what he took to be the nose on this enormous visage opened, and he saw Bertha standing there. It was the door, and she was anxiously peering out. Then the eyes, so fierce and glaring, quickly resolved themselves into windows, and the teeth into snow heaps covering the withered shrubs before the house, and he saw that he had been deceived. When he told Bertha, laughing heartily, of this occurrence, she looked serious and finally said:

"There's something funny about this house, anyway! I've seen and felt queer things more than once. Sometimes it seemed to me that the house was really moving, and twice when I felt so I looked out and it seemed to me that it was just settling down on the ground as if it had truly been up in the air."

"Nonsense!" cried Alfred. "How could a house move?"

"I don't care," exclaimed the girl. "I felt it. And always when I had been sort of making a half-wish that we were somewhere else. It seemed to me that my thought moved the whole house, and that it was going away with me slowly."

"I just wish it could move and carry us away to some wonderful land where nobody round here has ever been and where we'd have adventures," cried Alfred.

"Here she goes!" cried the rooster, suddenly. "I feel her moving."

So did Alfred, for the little house was surging like a boat in a storm. Bertha clutched her arm in affright. The goat looked anxious, but the cow's face showed no alarm at all. The rooster laughed.

"Remain where you are and all will come out right," said the cow. "I have been expecting this for some time, and now that it has happened I will explain. This used to be the home of a great conjuror ages ago, and all sorts of things happened in it. I was not sure that things would happen again, so I didn't make any definite predictions, but I see now that they're going to, all right."

In a few minutes, although they felt nothing, they were conscious that they were in another place. All motion had ceased and Alfred ran to the door and opened it. He looked out upon a tropical night scene; palms as tall as steeples waved over a white road that ran before the door into the darkness; while the moon shone upon a land of fruitful abundance and warm summer zephyrs moved the petals of flowers beside the door. Bertha exclaimed:

"Oh, we have come to Fairyland!"

Neither of them dared to venture from the threshold, but stood there gazing until they became sleepy and then turned to seek their beds, when to their amazement they found that every article of home-made furniture had been transformed into some magnificent carved and upholstered creation fit for a palace, while the bleckened walls were covered with gorgeous tapestry and pictures. Statues, vases and lamps stood about everywhere.

When they awoke next morning it was broad day. Alfred looked out and saw a large oval signboard swinging before the palatial edifice, with a picture upon it of a strange bird and the words in gold letters:

THE SIGN OF THE EVERGREEN GINK.

an examination of the house, assisted by the three animals, who showed as much interest as he.

Another night passed, and in the morning Alfred, intending to take a walk and see the country, went to the front door and found there a man and a woman, both of whom were very handsome and noble-looking, but covered with dust from head to foot. The man asked:

"Is not this the inn of the Evergreen Gink?"

"It is," replied Alfred, "and I am the inn keeper," he added. "I am the King of Hilaria and this is the Queen, and we are fleeing from an ogre out of whose house we escaped yesterday. He is pursuing us, and the cow said that we could find a safe refuge here."

"Well, I dunno," said Albert, dubiously. "I can't see how we are going to protect you against an ogre, that is, if it's a real one, which I have never considered possible."

"Oh, he's real enough," said King Momus. "When you see him you will have not the slightest doubt. But let us in, for we are faint with hunger and fatigue."

Of course, Alfred admitted them at once, for he imagined that they were deluded creatures, but they had scarcely eaten their breakfast before the ogre was seen approaching at great speed. Alfred trembled.

They fled at once to the very garret, but they could hear the ogre dash into the house even from there. He rushed from room to room seeking them, for like any ogre he could smell them distinctly, but he could not find them, for the doors in the house seemed marvelously and wonderfully arranged to delude and mystify ogres. As fast as he entered one door another appeared before him, until exhausted and mortified, for such a thing had never happened to him before, he stumbled into the cow's apartment, to which she had some time before retired, and was placidly chewing her cud.

Now the ogre had never before seen such a creature as a cow, for in this land they get their milk from trees, just as we get our maple sugar, and he was frightened at the great horned beast; but when in her alarm she uttered a loud and prolonged "moo" he fainted from sheer fright.

Then the cow ran out, and in a few minutes, when the ogre had recovered, he did the same thing, fleeing from that region as fast as he could, and he was never seen again. From the top floor they watched him running away, and not until the cow came up and explained the matter did they dare go down stairs, but then they rejoiced.

King Momus then told them that the ogre had invaded the kingdom of Hilaria, and after devastating much of the land had carried away the monarch and his wife to his abode in the mountains, where he daily tortured them by threatening to eat them raw. Momus offered a large sum to Alfred if he would procure him the means of returning to his own kingdom, as at present he was entirely destitute, as well as totally ignorant as to where he was, but the boy was as ignorant himself, and all he could promise the King was that he could remain in the magic house until something turned up.

He did not tell the King anything about the wonderful dwelling, however, feeling that it should be kept a secret, and he permitted the monarch to imagine that he had either built it or had inherited it.

In the afternoon another man stopped before the inn and Alfred hurried to meet him. This man was old and was dressed in a large robe of crimson, all covered with strange figures of animals, moons, stars, suns, triangles and queer wriggling symbols. His hat was tall and pointed, and from its tip hung a green tassel by a long silk cord. In his hand was a mammoth book with great brass clasps, the weight of which caused him to lean over. His eyes were black and piercing; beside them filled Alfred with a sort of terror, as if the man could read his very thoughts. He said to the lad:

"Ha! I have sought you long! This house has been here but a few days. Whence came you with it?"

"I—I found it in the woods," stammered Alfred. "Is it yours?" He felt that at last the owner of the mystic dwelling had arrived.

"It will now be mine," replied the man with the awful eyes, fixing a stern look upon the boy. "It belonged to Brother Jusipius Verspicken, who was a famous magician, even as I myself, but he was not as great as I. My name is Doldermunnus; perhaps you have heard of me?"

Alfred had lost his voice from terror, therefore he said nothing. The magician did not wait for a reply, but entered the house. He smiled as he saw the magnificent interior, and walking to a corner of the room tapped on the wall at a spot where a great rose was carved in the wood, and a door promptly opened, revealing shelves filled with gold coins in row after row!

"Ha! It is still here. Jusipius was a saving body! I have need of all this and more."

Then he went into a room, but left the door open, so that he could see what was going on outside. He threw himself upon the bed, but, to his amazement, it began to spin around with him like a top. He shouted incantations and spells, but it spun faster and faster until it threw him out, not on the floor, but up to the ceiling, where he stuck like a fly.

He bent down to seize the book, which had descended to the floor before the fireplace. Just then the goat, who had smelled the odor of burning hair, entered the room; and, seeing that form attired in provoking red in such a tempting and inviting attitude, he darted at him and butted him heartily.

It was like the shock of a battering ram, and the magician shot into the fire. In an instant he shriveled up like a sheet of tissue paper.

Alfred, who had been attracted by the noise, took the book and went to the King. Said he:

"We have been saved by an accident, but somehow I think we would do well to leave this place. I wish there were some way of getting to your kingdom."

"Why, bless my soul, we are moving!" cried the monarch, and the next moment he declared that he saw his own palace opposite. Sure enough, there it was, for the magic house had instantly moved to Hilaria. The king and queen hurried out, and then the air was filled with the rejoicings of their subjects, who had been mourning their absence and suffering sadly.

They remained there for a long time, long enough for Alfred to fall deeply in love with the Princess Hazeline, daughter of King Momus, and for her to love him so fondly that she declared no other should possess her, although twenty princes of neighboring realms strove with each other for one glance from her violet eyes.

The King, although he had expressed great gratitude to Alfred for rescuing him from the ogre, was unwilling to have a mere American, without royalty or even noble blood, for a son-in-law, and he refused to consent to their marriage. He did not refuse to allow Hazeline to visit Bertha, and therefore the lovers decided that they would defy the monarch and marry in spite of his wishes; so everything was arranged for the wedding.

The secret leaked out, however, and before the minister arrived on the scene the mansion was surrounded by the king's soldiers who were instructed to arrest Alfred and take him to the royal prison. Bertha saw them march up and realized in a moment what was about to happen. Running to Alfred, she told him to escape by the back way, but her brother said:

"No. Hazeline is here, and, although we perhaps may be hindered, the marriage shall not be prevented. All is not lost yet, be a joyful. We will move the house again!"

"Oh, be careful!" cried Bertha. "You can't tell where it will take us!"

"I wish it to take us immediately back to our clearing in the woods!" said Alfred, and in the twinkling of an eye it was there; and even while they gazed out of the window they saw the servants shoveling snow from the walks that led from the magic house to the dark pine woods surrounding the clearing. The rooster was crowing loudly, and they saw the cow leading two persons toward the mansion in her usual polite fashion.

In another instant Bertha recognized her father and mother and ran wildly down to meet them.

They had both been quarantined by the Health Board because a smallpox sufferer had ridden in the stage with them, and had not been allowed to write home until a long period had passed.

Alfred takes mighty good care never to make a wish in that strange house, although sometimes the Princess hints that a visit to her own land would be a welcome change.

Alfred will not take any chances in that direction, unless he receives a letter from King Momus telling him that all is forgiven, for one exhibition of the monarch's ingratitude was enough for him.