

## THE BABES IN THE WOOD.

ONCE upon a time there lived a good and wise Lord and a beautiful Lady.

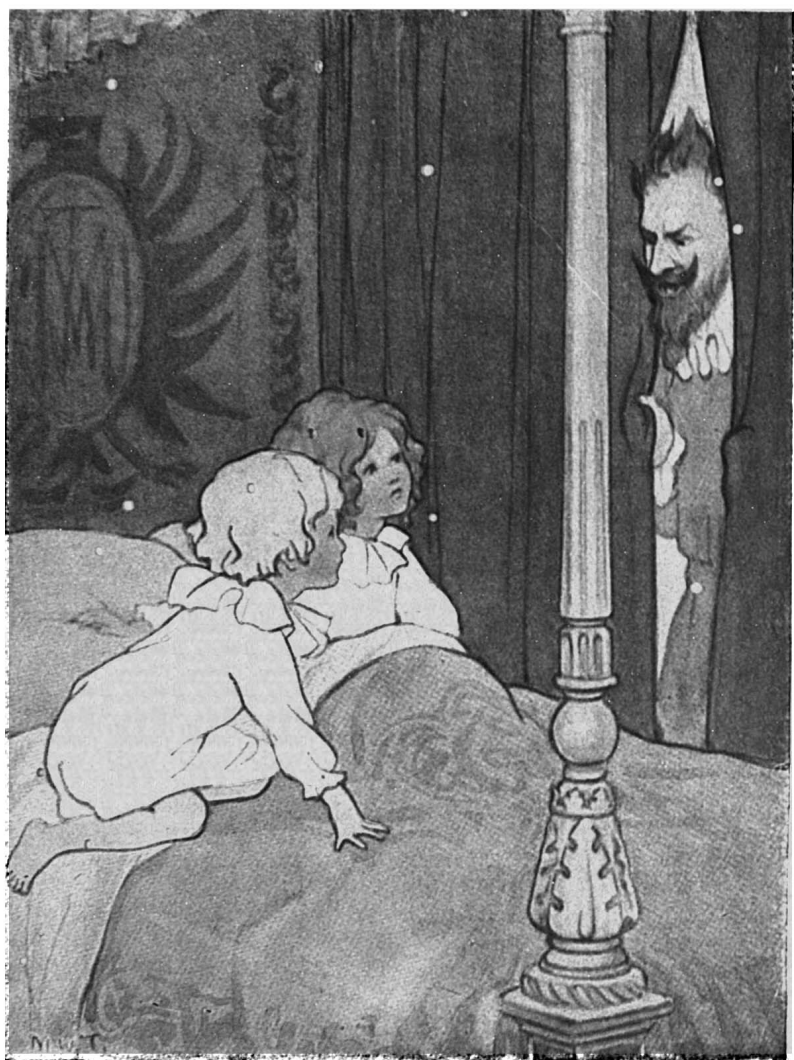
They had two dear little children—a fine boy and a very pretty girl. Their home was one of the happiest in all the land, for they loved one another dearly; and the father and mother, being noble and kind, had taught their children to be so too.

But soon great misfortunes came to this happy family.

First, the mother died, which was a great blow to the children. Then, a short time after, when the boy was only five years old and the little girl a year younger, their dear father was also taken away.

When the good Lord knew that his end was near, he sent for his brother; and, calling him to the bedside, said:

“Dear brother, I am dying. In a few short hours, or days at most, my poor little Babes



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will be alone in the world. Happily, I am able to leave them well provided for, for I have saved money enough for all their needs. I leave them to your care, since you are the only relative they have. Guard and cherish them, I beg you, for my sake! My son in years to come will have this castle, and money enough to keep up his proper state; and my daughter will have a sufficient fortune. I ask you, my brother, to take charge of everything until they are old enough to manage their own affairs. I beg you to promise that you will deal justly by them, and love them for my sake!"

"I will care for them as if they were my own!" said the younger Lord. A few hours later the good Lord died, well content.

A week or two after the funeral the Uncle took the two children away to his own castle to live with him, and at first treated them kindly.

At heart, however, he was a bad man, and quite unlike the good Lord who had passed away. He was greedy and cruel; and while he watched the helpless children at their play a cunning plan shaped itself in his mind by which he hoped to get rid of them, and thus

be able to keep their money and lands for himself.

One night, late in autumn, he sent for two robbers, whom he knew to be bold and bad men, ready in return for money to do any cruel deed. He bade them take the two little children out into the forest next day and there kill them, promising them a large sum of money in return. The robbers agreed to do as he wished, and, very pleased at the prospect of getting money so easily, they sat drinking until late in the night.

Next morning the wicked Uncle came quite early to the room where the children slept. "Rise," he said, "and dress quickly. Two friends of mine are going to take you for a stroll in the woods this fine morning."

"But we haven't had our breakfast yet, and we're *so* hungry!" cried the little boy, remembering, also, that they had not had any supper the night before.

"I don't like those big, ugly men! They frighten me!" cried the little girl, when they reached the hall where the two robbers were waiting.

She began to cry, but the wicked Uncle took no notice of either tears or words. The

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robbers took the children by the hand and dragged them away to the darkest part of the wood.

The poor little orphans were so frightened that they dared not even whisper to each other. When they came to the darkest part of the forest, and found that the robbers meant to kill them, they cried and cried, and, falling on their knees, begged for mercy.

So piteously did they plead that one of the men, whose heart was not quite so hard as that of his mate, felt suddenly a little sorry for the cruel deed he was about to do, and would have spared their lives. But his companion would not hear of this, and cried angrily, "Do not be a fool, man! Let us kill the brats, or else we shall not get the reward!"

The other robber, however, still wished to save the children; and at last the squabble between the two grew so fierce that they started to fight, drawing knives and rushing at each other desperately.

The two men fought for a long time, while the children sat helplessly on a tree-trunk, fearing to run away lest the cruel knives should be plunged into their own breasts.

At last the cruelest robber was killed.



The other then took the trembling children by the hand and led them on again. When they had reached the most lonely part of the forest, he made them sit down under a tree, and said to them, "Stay here a short time and rest, little ones, while I go to find some food for you! I will not be long!"

He soon disappeared among the trees, and quickly made his way to the path, since he had not the slightest intention of returning to the children again. When he got back to the castle of the wicked Uncle, he declared that the little boy and his sister were dead, and claimed the promised reward. The bad Lord was glad to hear that he might now claim the estates of his dead brother, and willingly paid over the money to the robber, who took it and returned to his usual evil way of living.

Meanwhile, the poor Babes sat under the tree and patiently awaited the robber's return. After several hours had passed they felt sure he did not mean to return to them, and the little boy said:

"We are left alone, little sister, and we must try to find our way out of this dreadful forest as best we can!"

The little girl began to cry, for she was

already so tired and hungry that she felt she could hardly move; but her brother took her by the hand, bravely keeping back his own tears, and together they wandered through the dense wood, trying to find a path that would take them out.

But every step they took led them farther into the forest; and at last the sun went down and night came on.

Then, as the stars came out one by one, the little girl cried:

"I can go no farther, dear brother! Oh, must we stay all night in this dreadful forest?"

"I'm afraid so, little sister!" replied the boy, adding with a brave smile, "But it is not really so dreadful, after all. See, there are the dear little stars twinkling above us."

They were now in a deep, sheltered glade, and, too hungry and worn out to go another step, they threw themselves down on a soft mossy bank. With their little arms lovingly twined round each other, and their pale cheeks closely pressed together, they soon fell asleep. Two dear little squirrels perched on the tree above stood as sentries over them all night; and the sweet song of a nightingale

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lulled them to sleep. They dreamt of their dear father and mother; and, as the night wore on, a sweet smile of peace stole over the faces of the two little sleepers.

When dawn came and the golden sunlight streamed through the over-hanging trees, the two sweet Babes still lay locked in each other's arms. The sun climbed higher and higher, but still they did not stir nor open their eyes, for they had died in their sleep, and all their troubles were at an end.

When the robin-redbreasts and the squirrels looked down on the little brother and sister, they knew that they were dead; and as the birds could not dig a grave for them, they brought the autumn-tinted leaves in their bills and showered them over the still forms which lay upon the ground.

Quickly and quietly the little workers performed their labour of love; and, ere long, the two Babes were covered with a soft pall of autumn leaves. Then the robins sang a mournful song; and the squirrels and the rabbits felt so sad that they would not gambol or play any more that day.

As for the wicked Uncle, he did not long enjoy his ill-gotten gains. From that day

no luck came to him. The robber who had left the children to die in the wood was condemned to death for another crime, and made a full confession of his misdeeds, so that the sad story of the poor Babes in the Wood was known all through the countryside. People would have nothing further to do with the wicked Uncle; little by little he lost all his ill-gotten wealth and died at last in great poverty.