ROSECHEN AND THE WICKED MAGPIE

EVALEEN STEIN

"COME, MAGPIE! COME, SEE WHAT I HAVE BROUGHT YOU!"—*Page 62.*

ROSECHEN AND THE WICKED MAGPIE

By

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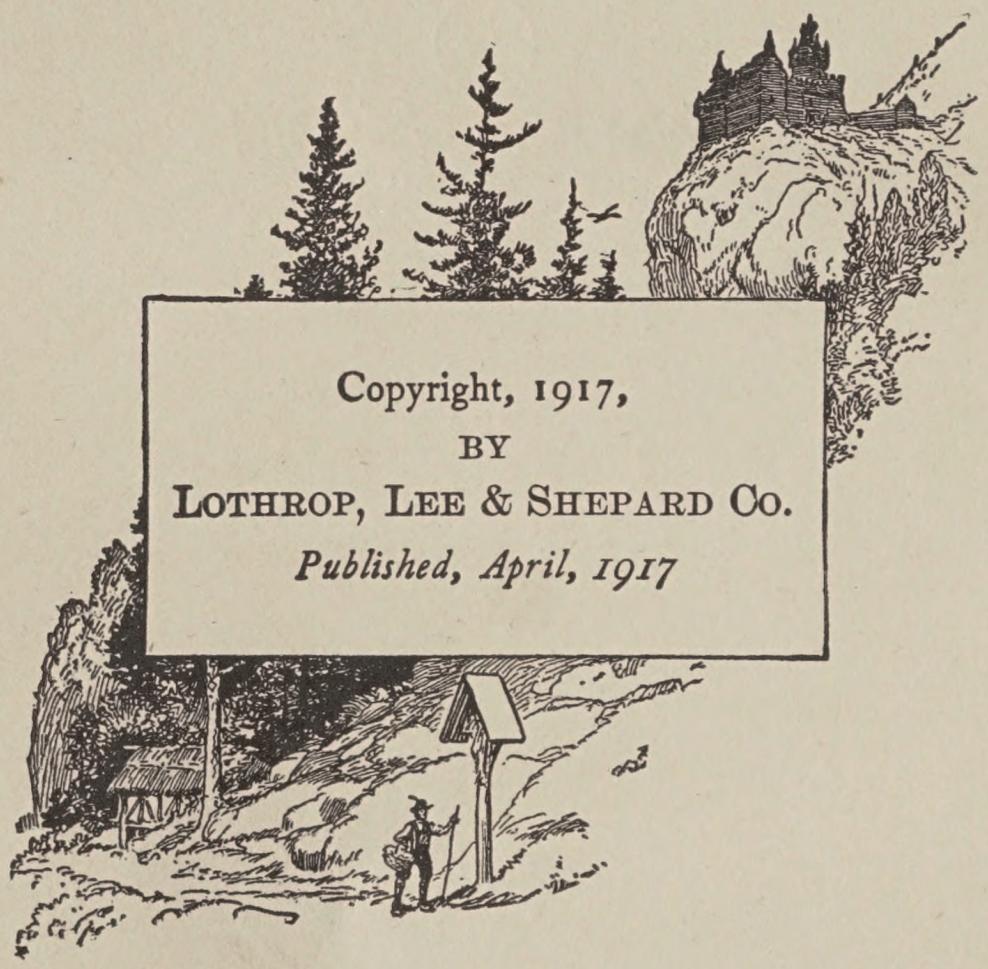
BOSTON
LOTHROP, LEE & SHEPARD CO.



Published, April, 1917


To My Mother

To The Reader

THERE is still standing in Austria a certain old castle which bears the name of an ancient and noble family; and if one were to go thither and search in some of its forgotten corners he might perhaps find the long-empty cage in which for two hundred years a magpie was always kept imprisoned, just as the one in the following pages, and for a like reason. So "the wicked magpie" really existed; and as for the rest of this little tale,—ah, well, very likely it all happened, too, just as I have set it down.

EVALEEN STEIN.

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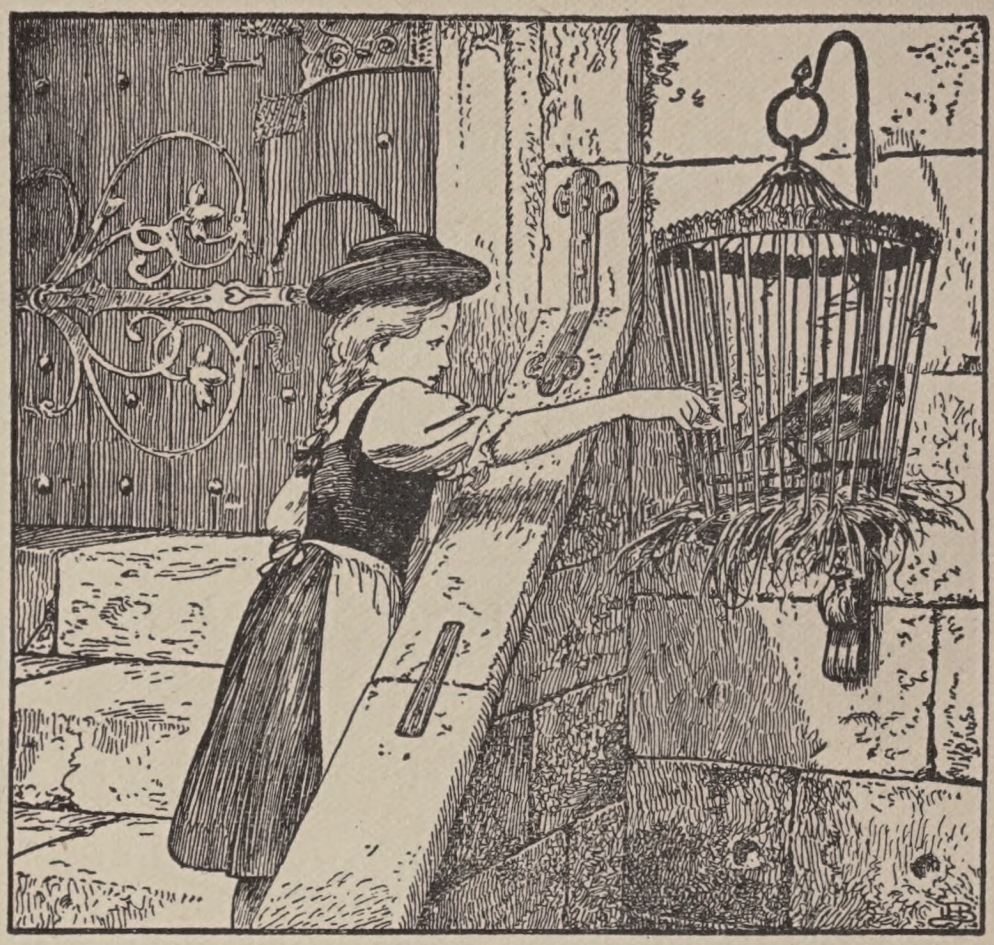


I

ROSECHEN GOES TO CASTLE HOHENBERG

FAR away, across the sea, in that part of the Austrian land known as the Tyrol, there rises a spur of the great chain of mountains called the Alps. These Tyrolese Alps are very beautiful, with wonderful snowy peaks from which icy torrents go rushing and

tumbling down to water the deep green valleys below.

Midway up the slope of one of the loftiest of the peaks there juts a steep, craggy rock; and perched on this, a very long time ago, there stood an ancient castle. On three sides its gray walls rose sheer and tall from the very edge of the crags; but on the fourth side a winding pathway led up the mountain to the drawbridge that spanned a deep moat protecting the castle gate. Beyond the gate was a paved courtyard surrounded by weather-beaten towers; and in one of the grayest of these, fixed in the stones at about the height of a man's head from the ground, was a bracket wrought of iron. It was shaped like a dragon whose upcurled tail formed a hook from the tip of which dangled a small cage of the same dark metal.

Within this cage one spring morning, ever so long ago, an old magpie sat peering mournfully out between the rusty iron bars. His eyes, once so bright and full of life, were dim and half closed, and his once beautiful feathers had quite lost their luster. The white of his breast was dingy, the glossy black of his wings had grown rusty, like the bars of his cage, and the rich rainbow hues of blue and green and purple, of which he had once been so proud, no longer shone from his bedraggled body. As he sat huddled close to the end of his perch he scarcely noticed that it was the one hour of the long day in which the spring sunlight strayed into the corner of the damp old tower where hung his cage. Nor did he lift his head as with a creaking of great bolts the porter opened the castle gate so that a woman and a little girl might enter.

They were peasant folk from the green valley below; and the woman carried, swung from a wooden bar across her shoulders, two copper cans filled with milk; while the little girl tugged with both hands a large osier basket covered with cabbage leaves from beneath which peeped the fresh green of lettuce and young vegetables. They both wore short, full skirts of dark cloth with black bodices and wide white sleeves, and each had an apron with a border embroidered in bright colors. On the woman's head was a white cap, but the little girl's flaxen braids hung from beneath a broad-brimmed hat of home-plaited straw.

The gate shut behind them with a clang as they stepped into the courtyard; and the little girl, who had never before come thither, looked about her with bright eager eyes.

The old magpie saw her dimly, and only half roused himself as presently she cried, "Oh, Mother, see! There is a cage like my starling's, only not so pretty! Is the wicked magpie in it?" And putting her basket down on the paving stones, she stood on tip-toe trying to see into the cage hanging above her head.

"Yes, Rosechen," answered the woman, "that is the wicked magpie I have told you about."

The poor old magpie huddled back again in the corner of his cage and hid his head under his wing. "The wicked magpie!" How often he had heard those three words! Indeed, he could have said them very well himself had he chosen to;—but he hated, hated, *hated* them! He did not know what they meant, but he knew that for years and

years people had said them, and then, looking at him scornfully and shrugging their shoulders, they would turn away, no longer caring to notice him.

But the little girl was *not* looking at him scornfully, but with an intent curiosity. In a moment she ran up the lower steps of a stone stair leading to a door in the tower; from these she could look into the cage, and as she looked her blue eyes filled with compassion. And even the old magpie started and half opened his eyes as she exclaimed in a pitying voice, "But, Mother, he does not look wicked, nor cross, as I thought he would! He just looks so old and miserable! And, Mother, I don't believe the cup of water in his cage has been freshened for days, and he has scarcely anything to eat!"

Here Rosechen sprang down the steps and

running to her basket seized a green lettuce leaf and hurrying back thrust it between the bars of the cage, which she could reach quite easily from the upper steps of the stairway.

But the magpie drew back with a tremulous fluttering of his bedraggled wings, and, opening wide his round eyes, looked at the little girl half in fear and half utter surprise.

"Come, magpie!" said Rosechen in a sweet coaxing voice, as she smiled kindly at him. "Come, taste this nice fresh lettuce!"

But still the old magpie stared, quite unable to understand. In all his life no one had ever spoken kindly to him. He had supposed all human beings hated magpies as much as he hated people. But here stood a strange little girl smiling at him and coaxing him with a leaf of lettuce!

He turned his head from side to side try-

ing to make out this puzzle; but in another moment Rosechen's mother, who had been gossipping with one of the serving women of the castle and so had not noticed what the little girl was doing, turned and saw her.

"Rosechen! Rosechen!" she cried in dismay, "what are you doing? Do you not know 'tis bad luck to talk to the wicked magpie? Come quickly, child, and fetch along your basket, or the castle cooks will grow impatient for their milk and vegetables!"

Rosechen came down the stair as her mother bade her, but could not resist pausing a moment at its foot to look up at the cage and say softly, "Good-bye, magpie! I hope you will like the lettuce!"

And the magpie, who had drawn back to the middle of his cage, again moved to the

end of his perch, and, pressing his body as close as possible to the rusty bars, cocked his head to one side and peered wonderingly down at his new-found friend.

As Rosechen took up her basket and followed her mother her blue eyes were still full of pity and her thoughts in the little iron cage; but as they crossed the courtyard there were so many interesting things to be seen that again she began to look eagerly about her. Opposite the gateway rose a tall tower in which a stately doorway led to the main hall of the castle. Over the door was a large stone shield on which was carved the coat of arms of the Baron Rudolph of Hohenberg, who was lord of the castle as his forefathers had been for hundreds of years before. But it was not to this doorway that Rosechen and her mother made their way, but to a

smaller one in a tower near by where was the great kitchen.

"Good-day, Frau Hedwig!" said a stout red-faced man wearing a cook's apron; "I hope you have brought plenty of milk," he added anxiously, "for Baron Rudolph has ordered a whey pudding for his dinner and he will be angry if it is not ready!" Then as his glance fell on Rosechen, "Hey, child!" he said, "have you brought something, too?"

As they stepped within the large room Rosechen timidly set down her basket on the stone flagging of the floor, while one of the maids took the milk cans her mother had carried and emptied them into some earthen jugs in a near-by corner. At one side of the room was a huge fireplace where on a long spit meat was roasting, while in a number of brass and copper kettles and

saucepans the castle dinner was being made ready over glowing coals.

A boy scullion, after a pleasant greeting to Rosechen, emptied her basket, and the little girl interested herself in watching all going on in the kitchen, while her mother talked a bit with some of her friends there; for Frau Hedwig came often and knew most of the humbler folk about the castle. By and by, when she had learned all the news of Hohenberg in exchange for that of the green valley below, she called Rosechen to her and they started across the courtyard toward the gate.

Though Rosechen had forgotten the magpie for a while, as they waited for the porter to open the gate again she looked up at the old tower and the little iron cage where the magpie sat with his wings folded and his head drooped on his dingy breast.

Rosechen gave a little perplexed sigh, and, when they had passed over the drawbridge and began to descend the steep path leading down the mountain, "Mother," she said to Frau Hedwig as she trudged along beside her, "please tell me again about the wicked magpie."

II

THE STORY OF THE WICKED MAGPIE

FRAU HEDWIG nodded her head to the little girl's request and repeated the story which had been handed down for generations among both the peasant folk and nobles of the region round the castle.

"You know," she began, "it was more

than two hundred years ago that Baron Friedrich of Hohenberg, one of the forefathers of our Baron Rudolph, gave a wonderful necklace of pearls to the Lady Irma, his wife; for he dearly loved her. Each pearl had been chosen with the greatest care, and the whole necklace gleamed and glistened as white as milk yet with such lovely colors all underneath that the Lady Irma said it was as if a string of snowflakes had been dipped in the end of a rainbow. It was a birthday gift, and Lady Irma was more pleased with it than with anything else she had ever had."

"Yes," said Rosechen, "and I remember you said they had a great birthday feast on the day Baron Friedrich gave her the necklace."

"And when the feasting was over," con-

tinued her mother, "and Lady Irma went up the winding stair to the room where she slept ——"

"The winding stair?" repeated Rosechen inquiringly, for the little girl had never seen one.

"Yes, child," said Frau Hedwig, with a wise smile, "that is the kind one sees in castles; they wind around inside the great towers and are quite different from the ladder we have to climb to reach our loft."

"Oh!" murmured Rosechen, thinking how grand it must be to live in a castle.

"Well," went on Frau Hedwig, "as I was saying, when Lady Irma went up the winding stair to her chamber, the tire-woman who waited upon her unfastened the necklace and laid it on an oaken table, meaning by and by to shut it up in the beautiful carved box

where Lady Irma kept the chains and jewels she was not wearing. But the tire-woman forgot to put the necklace away, so it stayed on the table all night.

"The next day when Lady Irma wanted to wear the pearls again, they were nowhere to be found. For days they searched all over the castle, up-stairs and down, but there was no trace of the missing necklace.

"Then they tried to remember who had been in the room beside the tire-woman; for she was an old and trusted servant and Lady Irma felt sure she could not possibly have taken it. At last some one reminded them that a young peasant named Jan, who had lately come to serve in the castle, had carried up an armful of fagots to kindle a fire in Lady Irma's chamber on the day the pearls were lost.

"Poor Jan declared he had never even seen the necklace, but Baron Friedrich, who was hot-tempered like our Baron Rudolph" (here Frau Hedwig sighed), "and very angry because Lady Irma had been robbed of the gift she cared so much for, ordered Jan to be taken and put in prison in one of the castle dungeons."

"And did you say he was in the dungeon a whole year, Mother, before he died?" asked Rosechen in an awed voice.

"It was three years, my child," answered her mother. "He was a fine strong young man, but in the terrible underground dungeon he wasted away and died miserably; though with his last breath he still declared he was innocent."

"And how long was it before they found the magpie's nest?" again asked the little girl.

"I believe," said Frau Hedwig, "it was a twelvemonth after Jan died that one day a workman climbed to the top of one of the castle towers to place some new tiles on the roof, and there, tucked away behind the parapet, he found the nest of a magpie and noticed that in it was something white and glistening."

"It was the pearl necklace!" said Rosechen, who knew the story fairly well. "And, Mother, is it true that magpies always like bright, shining things?"

"So folks say," answered Frau Hedwig. "I remember once, when I was a little girl, my father cut down a forest tree in which was a magpie's nest, and in it were some bits of a broken porringer and some white pebbles. So when Lady Irma's necklace lay on the oaken table and the morning sunlight streamed through an open window near by and made

all the pearls glisten, of course the first passing magpie saw it and wanted it. And it was no doubt very easy for him to dart in the window and carry it off in his strong beak. At any rate the nest on the castle roof plainly proved that a magpie had been the real robber and not poor Jan who had suffered death in the dungeon."

"I should think Baron Friedrich and Lady Irma would have felt dreadfully sorry when they found it out!" said Rosechen, her blue eyes filling with tears of quick sympathy as she thought of the misery of the poor young peasant who had died for an act of which he was innocent.

"Indeed they felt sorry enough!" replied her mother. "Baron Friedrich was filled with remorse because he had unjustly accused Jan, and he was very, very angry with the magpie

and determined that it should be punished. But they could not find the real thief, for the nest had long been empty save for the pearl necklace.

"Nevertheless Baron Friedrich commanded that an iron cage be made, and when it was finished he had one of his huntsmen snare a magpie which he ordered to be kept prisoner in the cage so long as it lived."

"But, Mother," interrupted Rosechen, "you just said that they could not find the magpie that had really been the robber!" And the perplexed look came again into her face.

"To be sure, child!" answered her mother. "Of course among the many magpies flying about our forests and valleys no one could possibly pick out the real thief. Moreover, as the nest on the castle roof was empty, the magpie who stole the pearls must either have died or

flown away. But Baron Friedrich wanted to keep one always prisoner in the iron cage so that it might remind him and others that one of its race had been a robber and had caused the death of an innocent man.

"He ordered, too, that it be given barely enough food and water to keep it alive, and that when it died another magpie must be found to take its place, so that always at the Castle of Hohenberg one of these birds should be kept prisoner."

"And has there always been a magpie in the cage, Mother?" asked Rosechen.

"Yes," said her mother, "for two hundred years the children and great-great-grandchildren of Baron Friedrich and Lady Irma, as one by one they have grown up to be lords of the castle, have always kept a magpie in the little iron cage. People call it 'the

wicked magpie,' and it is ill luck, child, to speak to it!" finished Frau Hedwig earnestly.

"But, Mother," said Rosechen, still greatly perplexed, "I do not see why people call him wicked! The poor magpie up there in the cage never did any harm!"

"Well," replied her mother, "for these two hundred years the magpie in the cage has always been called wicked. And it is not for us poor peasants to say that the great folks at the castle are wrong. They are a great deal wiser than we are."

And Frau Hedwig nodded her head with a satisfied air. For most of the peasant people were simple souls who thought that things which had been done for a very long time must be right, especially if done by the noble folk.

But Rosechen could not understand why

the poor magpie should suffer for something another magpie had done. And she thought and thought about it, trying to straighten it out in her mind. For although she had heard the story before, she was much more interested in it now that she had really seen the magpie and how forlorn he looked. To be sure, she had a little starling in a cage at home; but the cage was large and made of pretty wicker and the starling hung in the sunshine and had plenty of fresh water and food, and Rosechen had petted it so much that it would often let her carry it about on her finger. But the magpie, which was a much larger bird, could scarcely move about in his iron prison which hung all day long in the shadow of the damp old tower; and Rosechen sighed as she remembered how neglected and miserable he looked.

III

ROSECHEN AND HER GEESE

BUT while Rosechen and her mother had been talking, they had kept on trudging down the steep mountain path. A torrent of clear icy water splashed and tumbled along beside them, now and then plunging over the edge of some craggy rock and making a

pretty little waterfall flecked with white foam and filled with sparkling light and tinkling music.

By and by, when it reached the valley, it spread out into a silvery stream flowing between mossy boulders and dripping alder bushes. Here and there its waters slipped into quiet shadowy pools where speckled fishes moved lazily to and fro; and then laughing in the sunlight it sped away and entered a deep forest which closed in the valley.

At the foot of the mountain which Frau Hedwig and Rosechen were descending there was a little rustic bridge, and, beyond this, a grassy meadow-land at the far edge of which stood a house surrounded by apple and cherry trees from which the last blossoms were falling in showers of white and rosy petals.

At the sight of this the little girl and her mother quickened their steps, and as they drew near the open doorway a burst of song greeted them from Rosechen's starling, whose pretty wicker cage was fastened to the wall without.

Frau Hedwig set her milk cans down on a bench under a cherry tree, while Rosechen hung her basket on a peg near the door of the house. This was much like those of the other peasants scattered through the valley. It was built of wood with the dark beams showing on the outer walls, and its wide overhanging roof was thatched with yellow straw. The same roof covered also a stable which joined the house and from which came a great cackling of geese.

"Hush!" cried Rosechen as she peeped in. "Do not be so noisy! I will soon come and

take you out." For Rosechen was the little goose-girl who attended them every day.

But the geese only wagged their heads impatiently as they waddled round and round on the earthen floor; for they had been penned up while Rosechen had gone with her mother to the castle, and were anxious to get out and nibble the fresh green grass. The cow and few sheep which belonged to the family had already left their stalls and were browsing in the meadow, watched over by Rosechen's father as he worked in the near-by garden.

"I will just get my knitting!" called Rosechen to the geese again noisily cackling, as she turned from the stable and followed Frau Hedwig into the house.

The room they entered, which was fairly large with a low ceiling crossed by heavy

brown rafters, was the main living-room of the family. In one corner was a curious stove made of earthen tiles; over it projected a wooden hood to carry off the smoke, and under this hung several copper pots and kettles. An open fire of peat smouldered in the stove, for it was here that Frau Hedwig did her cooking; and as the fire was hard to kindle (for no one had matches then) it was seldom allowed to go out.

Near a broad window at one side of the room stood a spinning-wheel, and beyond that was a dresser with a few earthenware dishes. Close by this two benches were fastened to the floor and in front of them was a heavy table, with carved ends, on which stood a jug of milk and some pewter plates. There was also a carved oaken chest for clothing; for through the long winter, when the snow

lay in great drifts over the valley, Rosechen's father with his few simple tools strove to make beautiful the things about their home. And so did Frau Hedwig, whose industrious fingers had fashioned many a lovely bit of embroidery on the linen cloth she spun and wove with her own hands from flax she had herself planted and tended.

For no matter how poor the peasant folk of Tyrol may be, they somehow always find time to make something beautiful about their homes. They will carve their tables and chairs, and put a little bright embroidery here and there on the house linen, they will make pottery mugs and dishes for themselves and paint them in quaint patterns, and will thus contrive to give an artistic touch to all sorts of things about their households.

Indeed, their patient fingers are never idle a moment, and Rosechen's father and mother were among the most industrious of the peasants in that valley. So although they all had to toil very hard for a bare living, nevertheless their home showed the touch of the loving labor that makes beautiful even the humblest things.

The little girl herself was learning much of her mother's handicraft, and her little fingers had helped to work the red and blue patterns in cross-stitch which bordered the curtains of the great bed which stood in one corner of the room. Near to this was a little wooden cradle with gayly painted rockers, and in it a baby was sleeping so soundly that it did not even waken when Rosechen and her mother came into the room. But as Frau Hedwig hastened to bend over the

cradle, the baby opened its eyes, blue like Rosechen's, and smiled.

"I do not believe Kaspar has wakened up once while we were gone!" said Frau Hedwig as she lifted him from the cradle and set him on the floor to play with a little wooden sheep which his father had carved for him.

Kaspar had on a little shirt of coarse homespun, his only bit of finery being his cap which Frau Hedwig had carefully embroidered with tiny sprigs of pinks. For peasant mothers of Tyrol strive always to have a pretty cap for the baby, even if he has but little else. Kaspar tugged at the strings of this cap with one hand and laughed and crowed as with the other he pounded the floor with the wooden sheep.

Rosechen stopped a moment to pet her little brother, and then going to the carved

chest she took out a partly knitted stocking of coarse blue yarn which her mother had spun; and with this in her hands (which she had been taught must never be idle) she went out of the room and into the stable. Here she opened the pen in which the geese were still impatiently cackling, and they scrambled out as fast as their clumsy web feet would allow, hurrying to reach the young grass of the meadow and the edge of the little stream beyond.

As Rosechen followed her noisy flock, her father, Peasant Johann, who was working in the garden, saw her, and "Rosechen!" he called. "Be careful, child, and do not let your geese swim across the brook, for Baron Rudolph has forbidden us to use any more of the grass on the farther bank! And we are allowed to use the pasture on this side

only so far as yonder boulder!" And Peasant Johann pointed to a large rounded rock at the edge of the brook.

"Yes, Father," answered Rosechen; and slowly making her way toward the brook she sat down on the boulder of which her father had spoken.

Here, while her fingers industriously knitted the blue yarn, her thoughts were busy elsewhere; for Rosechen, as she tended her geese, spent many hours by herself and so had time to think about a great many things. Beyond the brook, high up the mountainside she could see the jutting crag and the gray walls of the Castle of Hohenberg. And then she wondered why Baron Rudolph was so hard on the peasant people of the valley; for he was lord of the region round about and had the power to do pretty

much as he pleased to the poor peasant folk who lived on his land and were obliged to obey his commands.

"Why," said Rosechen to herself, as she gazed across the brook, "*why* does Baron Rudolph care whether our geese or our cow or sheep eat some of the grass over there! He has no use for it, and we have to take milk from our cow up to the castle, and so do other people from the valley. And nobody can fish in the brook only on one day in the week, and there are ever so many fish in it!"

Here Rosechen peered down into the clear water of a pool beyond the boulder and tried to count the speckled fishes darting to and fro.

"No," she decided, "Baron Rudolph and the people at the castle cannot possibly eat all the fish in this brook, and there are so many of us peasant folks who would like some!"

"And," she went on to herself, "there are the hares in the forest. No one dares to shoot any. And Father says that once one of the peasant men up the valley caught only one in a trap, and Baron Rudolph had him put in prison in the castle for a long time! Oh, I wonder if it was in that terrible dungeon where Peasant Jan died?" And her thoughts flew to the pearl necklace stolen from Lady Irma, and to the poor old magpie in the iron cage suffering punishment for something he had not done.

Rosechen sighed with a troubled air. It was all very hard for a little girl to understand. But she did wish that Baron Rudolph would not be so particular about not letting the people in the valley have things that they so much needed!

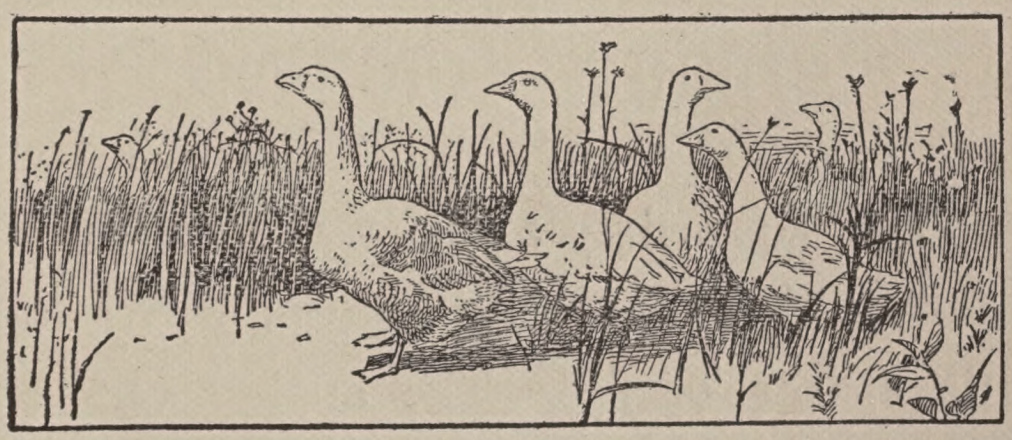
Just here Rosechen glanced around at her

geese which she had quite forgotten while she was thinking about the baron; and jumping up in dismay she laid her knitting on the boulder and hastily pulling off her little wooden shoes and stockings, she waded out into the clear water of the brook. For three of the geese which had been swimming in the pool near her had crossed over and landed on the farther bank and were waddling about in the forbidden grass.

"There!" said Rosechen as reaching the farther edge of the brook she broke a bough from an overhanging alder bush. "There! Go back again where you belong!" And she marshalled the unwilling geese into line and guided them back to the other side.

As they scattered the shining drops of water from their glossy feathers, Rosechen shook her rosy finger at them and said, "I am sure I

don't know why you have to stay in just one little bit of grass and water, but Baron Rudolph says you must, so you will have to mind!" she ended impressively; for the little goose-girl had been so much with them that she had gotten in the habit of talking to her geese quite as if they were people. And they all cackled and flapped their wings just as if they understood;—and perhaps they did; for geese are not nearly so silly as most people think them.



IV
CHERRY ~ PICKING

THE cherries on Peasant Johann's trees had ripened to a glossy red and shone and twinkled through the green leaves like little sparks of fire. The apples were beginning to mellow, and the row of mountain pinks which Rosechen had planted

near their door were full of fragrant flowers.

But through the meadows in front of the house the grass was nibbled so close that there were no wild blossoms as there had been in years gone by. For pasture-land in the valley was scarce and the poor peasant folk had hard work at best to find enough for their cows and sheep and flocks of geese; and Baron Rudolph was all the while allowing them the use of less and less of the land, although he exacted from them for the rent of their tiny farms just as much tax as ever, and always demanded the best of all the things they raised on their scanty ground and for which they were obliged to toil so hard.

In the days of Baron Rudolph's father, and indeed in the younger days of Baron Ru-

dolph himself, they had always gathered their cows and sheep together in the summer when the grass had been cropped from the meadows of the valley, and had sent them up to some of the high mountain pastures. There, under the care of one of the peasant folk, they stayed until the meadow grass might have time to grow again.

But Baron Rudolph, who was becoming harder and more selfish all the while, had forbidden this for two years now and the flocks and herds of the valley had suffered much. There was good pasture on the other side of the mountain brook, but the baron, who was fond of hunting, had declared that it must be kept as a place for the hares which he liked to chase; just as he wanted the higher mountains kept for the fleet-footed chamois which also he delighted to hunt.

And no matter how much the peasants suffered, they dared not complain; for Baron Rudolph was rich and powerful, and the dungeons of Castle Hohenberg had known many a poor prisoner.

Thinking of these things, Frau Hedwig sighed as she looked at the ripe cherries and the garden and the small field where rye and wheat were beginning to turn yellow; for she knew how little they would be allowed to keep. Nevertheless, she patiently prepared the potato soup which would be their only dinner, and, placing the iron pot over the fire, she carried little Kaspar out and set him under one of the cherry trees; then, "Rose-chen!" she called to the little girl who was tending her geese by the brook-side, "Rose-chen! Father will watch the geese; he must mend the bridge which has a broken rail; so

come and help me gather some cherries to take to the castle."

"Yes," said Peasant Johann, as he came to the bridge with his hammer and tools, "go, child, and do as your mother bids, and I will see to the geese."

So Rosechen ran across the meadow and helping her mother fetch a rustic ladder from the stable they placed it against one of the trees; Rosechen soon climbed into this and with nimble fingers began gathering the scarlet fruit in an osier basket which her mother handed to her.

She worked busily, and presently, "Here, Kaspar!" she cried, tossing down a shining cluster to the baby watching them with round blue eyes. Kaspar put up his chubby hands, and though he could not catch the cluster he laughed with delight as he scram-

bled toward it and seized it with his fat little fingers. He dangled it a moment in the sunlight thinking it the prettiest plaything he had ever had, and then, suddenly squeezing it tightly in his chubby fist, was about to thrust it into his mouth when Frau Hedwig spied him and quickly stopped him. "There!" she said. "Your clean shirt is all stained with cherry juice!"

But Kaspar only cried lustily, and would not be comforted till Frau Hedwig plucked a pink for him to smell and carried him off to the house where she had much work to do.

By and by Rosechen's basket was filled, and, coming down from the tree, "Mother!" she called, "must I take all these to the castle?"

"Yes, child," answered Frau Hedwig, coming to the door where Kaspar sat crooning to himself and blinking at the starling singing

in the sunlight. "Yes, you must take them all, and you had best start right away."

Rosechen took the heavy basket and trudged off across the meadow, where the cow and sheep were nibbling the few tufts of grass they could still find to eat, and then passing over the bridge she started up the steep path toward the crag of Hohenberg.

Up, up, wound the path, through dense thickets of hazel and fir-trees and tall pines with silvery green crowns and purple shadows beneath them. And always, close by, was the plashing and gurgling of the icy torrent as it rushed down the slopes to make the pretty brook below.

Rosechen's basket was heavy, and many times, quite out of breath, she was obliged to sit down and rest on some mossy rock. But though the mountain path was hard to climb,

everything was so beautiful that as she looked around with dreamy eyes she did not mind that the way was steep. The summer wind blew softly through the pines and filled the air with an aromatic fragrance. Here and there bluebells and forget-me-nots fringed the edges of the sparkling torrent, and tall ferns bordered its rocky pools with green. Far down in the valley a cuckoo was singing, the sweet notes of his name echoing faintly up the mountainside.

It was all so lovely that Rosechen's heart beat for joy, for she loved beautiful things. But before long she drew near the crag of Hohenberg, and as the gray walls of the castle loomed above her they seemed to shut out all the light and beauty around them.

Rosechen crossed the drawbridge with lagging steps; and when the porter opened the

great gate and she stood within the courtyard, she gave a little shiver.

The first time that Rosechen had come to the castle everything was so new to her and she had been so interested in looking around that she had not thought it so gloomy. But each time since, when she had carried things to Hohenberg, she had thought it a very sad and dismal place; and it seemed more gloomy than ever as she crossed the flagstones of the courtyard to the door of the kitchen tower.

V

THE MAGPIE AND HIS ONLY FRIEND

AS she entered the castle kitchen, "Good-morning, Rosechen!" "Good-morning!" came from the cooks and serving-folk at work there.

"I am sure," said one maid to another as she bent over a meat pasty she was making,

"it is good to see something bright in this cheerless place!" and she nodded toward the little girl, whose eyes were shining and her cheeks very pink from her hard climb.

"Yes," said the other maid, in a low voice, "Baron Rudolph grows every day harder to please! I wish I dared to go home!" And the maid sighed; for she was a peasant girl from the valley and very unhappy where she was, but she did not dare to leave the castle for fear the baron would punish her or her family.

Rosechen, though she had not heard the talk of the two maids, was talking herself with Wilhelm, the boy scullion who had come as usual to empty her basket and with whom she had become very good friends.

"Why is everybody so quiet here?" asked the little girl, "and why is it so gloomy?

Is it because Baron Rudolph is cross to every one here, too? Father says he is harder and harder on us peasant folk all the time, and he does not see how we can live if he takes more things away from us!"

"Hush, Rosechen!" said Wilhelm, who was a few years older than the little girl and had been at the castle long enough to know that the serving-people must not always speak their thoughts out loud unless they wished to risk a beating. "You had better be careful," he added; "there goes Baron Rudolph now!"

Rosechen turned and looked with eager curiosity at the baron, whom she had not happened to see when she had come to the castle before. He was now walking slowly across the courtyard on his way from one part of the castle to another. His hands were

clasped behind his back and though he was a tall man he did not seem so, as his shoulders were stooped and bent. His hair and beard were gray and his face stern and hard, and as Rosechen looked at him she wondered if he ever smiled.

As he passed into one of the towers at the far side of the courtyard and the heavy oaken door closed behind him, Wilhelm felt it safe to reply to Rosechen's questions. "Yes," he said, "Baron Rudolph is very cross and hateful, and no one dares disobey his least wishes for fear of punishment. The castle folks say things were not so bad when Lady Hildegarde lived, but you know that was before I came here. They say she was good and kind, and Baron Rudolph cared a great deal for her and was not so cross then to everybody. But it seems after she died he turned against every

one, and has been sour and disagreeable ever since!"

"Yes," said Rosechen, "I remember Mother said Baron Rudolph changed after his wife died. And Father said that when his son, young Master Conrad, married some one against Baron Rudolph's will, he drove him off without any money, and Father thinks he has been more cruel since then."

"Well," said Wilhelm, "I never saw Master Conrad, but I have heard the people here say he was kind and pleasant like Lady Hildegarde; and I am sure if I were in his place I would rather live somewhere else without any money than in this gloomy place! But I think it was cruel just the same for his own father to drive him off!"

But here one of the cooks called Wilhelm to scour a silver flagon for the baron's table,

and Rosechen, bidding him good-bye, took up her basket and started toward the gate.

As she passed the gray tower where hung the magpie's cage, she quickly stepped up the stone stair and taking from the pocket of her apron a cluster of three cherries held them temptingly where the end of the perch was fastened to the iron bars. "Come, magpie!" she said. "Come, see what I have brought you!"

And this time the poor old magpie did not draw back as on that first day when she had offered him the lettuce leaf. Instead he came as close as he could to the bars of his cage, and, looking at Rosechen with a brighter gleam in his dim old eyes, even made bold to peck at one of the cherries as she held it between her fingers.

"There!" she cried softly, laughing with delight. "You are not so afraid of me any

more, are you, magpie? Why, I wouldn't hurt you for the world. I just feel sorry for you, and I don't believe you are one bit wicked!"

And the magpie fluttered his wings, and, cocking his head, listened with interest to his little friend, the only one he had in the world. For each time Rosechen had come to the castle since that first day with Frau Hedwig, she had remembered to bring something, if only a scrap of bread, to the poor captive bird; and always as she offered it to him through the bars of his cage, she smiled and spoke to him.

To be sure, her mother had warned her that it was ill luck to speak to the magpie, and no doubt supposed that the little girl would do as every one else did and notice him no further. "But," said Rosechen to herself, "Mother did not really forbid me to speak to

him, and I am sure I am not afraid he will bring me any bad luck!" And smiling at him once more, "Good-bye!" she said, and tripping down the stair, passed out of the courtyard and through the gate on her way to the valley.

The magpie watched her as long as he could see her; and when she was gone sat quietly for quite a while, only now and then giving a little peck at the cluster of cherries shining between the rusty iron bars of his cage. Now and then, too, he chattered a little to himself in a cracked, broken voice, as very old people sometimes do.

Years before, when he had first been caught and placed in the cage, he had day after day shrieked and chattered loudly in high shrill notes; and often, attracted by his cries, passing magpies had flown near the tower and looked curiously at his cage. But

that was all long, long ago. He had grown hopeless and quiet now, and, except Rosechen, no one noticed him or paid the least attention to him.

The castle page, whose duty it was to give him his scanty food and water, merely thrust it into his cage without even a kindly look.

Perhaps he was thinking of all these things as he talked brokenly to himself. Perhaps he was wondering what had become of his mate with her pretty glossy feathers and her bright eyes, and of the five speckled eggs that had lain in their nest that morning he was caught in the cruel snare.

Poor old magpie! In front of the tower where his cage hung the outer wall of the castle rose gray and high, and he could not possibly see over it. He could not see down the mountain slope where stood the tall pine-

tree he had once chosen for his home. Perhaps it was just as well that he could not see it, and that he could not hear the tales its green-tasseled boughs always crooned and whispered as the mountain winds swept softly through them.

Yes, could he have heard them, it would have made him only more unhappy; for the pine-tree would have whispered to him, "Yes, I remember when you and your mate built your nest high up in my very crown. I remember, too, how careful you were to choose three of my sturdiest upper branches on which to rest it, and how large and fine you built it, and how you made its doorway at one side and raised a dome-shaped roof over it so that eagles or other birds of prey could not harm you. Indeed, you magpies are very clever in building your homes.

"Nevertheless, though your house was very safe, I hear from the winds and the other magpies that you met with misfortune one day in the forest, and that you have been for many years a prisoner. Your poor mate never knew why you did not come back to her, and she mourned long for you. And she had hard work, all alone, to feed your five little children she hatched from the speckled eggs. She has now long been dead; and the five little magpies—it is too bad you never saw them!—grew into handsome birds and flew away ever and ever so long ago.

"And there is nothing left of your beautiful dome-shaped house but a few weather-beaten sticks and some torn shreds of the white tufts of fleece for which you had so carefully searched the sheep pasture so that

your house might be warm and snug. Indeed, I am quite tired and ashamed of having this ragged and empty old nest still clinging to my topmost boughs, and I often beg the winter winds to tear it away and free me from so unsightly a burden!"

This is what the pine-tree would have whispered to the old magpie if he could have heard it; and then as the blue mists wrapped their mantle about it, it would perhaps have shaken its lofty crown, half in pity of the forlorn prisoner, and half in impatience that it must still suffer the annoyance of his ragged nest.

So it was just as well that the gray castle walls rose high about the rusty cage, where the captive bird sat with his head drooped on his breast.

VI

THE HARVEST FAILS

THE cherry season had long been past, and the fair promises of the early summer had not been kept. There had been no rain in the valley for many weeks, and the little fields of rye and wheat and barley belonging to the peasant folk were parched and with-

ered. Their cows and sheep had been obliged to crop the grass of the meadow-land so closely that scarcely more than the roots of it remained.

The brook had shrunken to half its former size, and when Rosechen took out her geese, if they swam across its shallow water to the farther side she no longer tried to prevent them. The grass there, though brown, was at least abundant and harbored many little insects which served them for food; and if in their search for these they frightened away a few hares,—why, Rosechen could not see what harm that was when her geese were so hungry. She did not know that two other of the peasants living farther down the valley had ventured to lead their cows across to the better pasturage, but had been harshly driven off by some of Baron Rudolph's gamekeepers

who threatened to take them to the castle for punishment if they dared do so again.

As Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig looked across their little fields where the yellowing grain was shrivelled on its stalks, they shook their heads sadly, and sighed as they thought of the coming winter. For a failure of their little crops meant bitter suffering.

Rosechen had helped her father and mother carry many a load of water for the kitchen garden beside the house; and though they had managed to keep it alive, it was very hard work to draw the water from the old-fashioned well into the copper milk-cans (which now there was never milk enough to fill) and then tug them to the parching ground. But Rosechen carried all she could, while the geese cackled loudly and wanted

her to pour the water over their dusty feathers instead.

And then, by and by, the rain came; and it rained and rained as though it meant to rain forever! The fields, which had been parched, were now sodden and wind-beaten. The mountain torrent rushed down the slopes with a noisy clamor and swelled the brook till it overflowed its banks and tore away a part of the bridge that Peasant Johann had so carefully mended.

Rosechen's geese cackled dismally as they waddled about on the damp earthen floor of the stable; for she did not dare to let them out for fear they would go to the brook and be carried away by its rushing waters. She fed them as best she could each day, though always they clamored for more; and then, going into the living-room and taking her

knitting she would tend Kaspar while Frau Hedwig worked steadily at her spinning-wheel.

Peasant Johann had shorn their few sheep and from their fleece, piled in a basket at her side, Rosechen's mother spun the thread which, later on, her skilful fingers must weave into cloth for their winter clothes. She no longer sang at her work as she used to do, but looked sad and troubled as patiently she turned her wheel.

When at last the rain ceased and Peasant Johann went through his little fields, where everywhere the water stood in glistening pools, his heart sank as he saw how poor and scanty was the grain he would be able to harvest from the bent and broken stalks. It would mean scarcely bread enough to keep them alive through the winter, and if he must take

the usual tithe of it to Baron Rudolph, he could not see how they could possibly live. To be sure, there were some apples on the trees and still some potatoes and beans and a few vegetables in the garden, but part of these also must be paid to the baron as rent for the tiny farm.

When, troubled and discouraged, Peasant Johann came into the house, Frau Hedwig looked up from her work, and "Johann," she said, "will there be any grain?"

"So little," answered Peasant Johann sadly, "that if I must take our tithe to the castle, I do not see what we will do for bread!"

Frau Hedwig said nothing, but bent over her work still closer while Rosechen was so troubled that she dropped some stitches in her knitting, and little Kaspar, looking from one to the other and seeing their sad faces, felt

that something was the matter and began to cry loudly.

"Never mind, Kaspar!" said his father gently, as he stooped and lifting the baby swung him over his shoulder and carried him out-of-doors, where he played with some sticks from a pile of fagots while Peasant Johann climbed to the roof and mended the thatch in which the wind and rain had torn a ragged hole.

As Roschen and her mother still worked inside, they were both busy with their own thoughts. Presently, "Mother," said Roschen, "why is it that Baron Rudolph owns all the valley and has a great castle and will not let our cow and sheep and geese have enough pasture?"

"There, there, child!" said Frau Hedwig. "You must not ask such troublesome ques-

tions! The lord of this valley has always lived in the Castle of Hohenberg and we peasant folk have to obey him; that is all I know." And Frau Hedwig sighed as she turned the spinning-wheel with tired fingers.

Meantime the swollen brook was all the while growing smaller; the harsh roar of its waters at last sank to a quiet murmur, and the summer wore away and the autumn drew near.

A few weeks later, when Peasant Johann with his wooden flail had threshed out his scanty harvest, the sacks of grain were even less than he had feared. And at last when the time approached when he must make another payment to Baron Rudolph, he looked so despairingly at the little supply that would be left that Frau Hedwig ventured to suggest a plan.

"I have been thinking," she said, "that there is nothing left for us to do but to ask Baron Rudolph to let us off from paying the rest of our rent this year; and perhaps next year, if the season is good, we can pay him double.

"He must know we have never before failed to pay our full tithe and that we are honest folk. Rosechen and I have carried our due of milk and vegetables and fruit to the castle ever since spring, and the maids up there say not one of the peasants of the valley, even those who have larger farms, has paid the rent more faithfully than we. And now that we have so little, surely even Baron Rudolph will have a little mercy!"

Peasant Johann listened with dismay to Frau Hedwig's speech; for he was a timid soul, and the thought of asking any favor of

Baron Rudolph filled him with terror. Indeed, all the peasants of the valley knew the story of Jan and the magpie, and though it had all happened long ago, the dungeons were still in the castle and the castle's lord still had power to imprison the valley folk if they made him angry.

But though Peasant Johann was frightened, he did not like Frau Hedwig to think him a coward, and as she insisted, at last he consented to go in a day or two; though he shook his head and declared it would be of no use.

"Well, you can at least try," said Frau Hedwig, who generally managed the household. And Peasant Johann nodded meekly, though he had little heart for her plan.

VII

PEASANT JOHANN GOES TO SEE BARON RUDOLPH

THE next morning was sharp and frosty, and Frau Hedwig declared that the snow would soon be coming and that Peasant Johann must make haste to do his errand to the castle before the path was buried deep in its wintry drifts. So reluctantly he made ready to go.

As he was to speak to Baron Rudolph himself, Frau Hedwig took from the chest his best clothes and these she carefully brushed, together with his cap with the black cock's feather stuck in one side. His braided jacket of green cloth had been handed down from his father, but his shirt with its embroidered front Frau Hedwig had spun and woven and made herself; and though both were old and worn, she kept them so carefully mended that Peasant Johann really looked very well as he set off across the meadow.

Over one arm he carried a basket in which Frau Hedwig had placed a few eggs from Rosechen's geese, so that he might not go quite empty-handed.

As he trudged slowly away, "Good luck to you!" she called after him, and little Kaspar in her arms gurgled and waved his little hands.

Rosechen, watching her geese by the brook's edge, had a mind to ask her father to see how the old magpie fared, for she had not been to the castle for some time; but then she thought that perhaps he would not like it that she had made friends with the unlucky prisoner in the cage, so she only said, "Good-bye, Father! I hope Baron Rudolph will not be cross!"

Peasant Johann, as he muttered good-bye, heartily hoped so, too; for he had no liking for his errand as he made his way slowly up the steep mountain path. The ground was rough and stony, for the rains had washed and furrowed the slopes and strewn them with boulders. Here and there through the forests on either side the storm winds had broken great boughs from the trees, whose leaves were already turning brown and yellow. Now and then a company of birds

passed overhead, flying toward the south ; for the winter came early there among the mountains.

At last Peasant Johann had climbed to the top of the crag and crossed the drawbridge ; and when the porter opened the heavy gate and let him in, he entered the courtyard with lagging steps.

The magpie from his tower heard the gate open, and as he could see but dimly, he held his head to one side and listened for Rosechen's voice. For ever since the little girl had made friends with him, every time any one came into the courtyard he listened eagerly for her.

But when no Rosechen came running up the stone stair to speak to him, presently he dropped his head again, with a little shiver, and folded his wings closer about him ; for

the air was sharp and chill that blew around the old tower.

Meantime, Peasant Johann had met the castle steward, who had come out to give some directions to several pages loitering about, and had made bold to ask to see Baron Rudolph.

"The baron is in the castle hall looking over some accounts," answered the steward, glancing rather curiously at Peasant Johann whom he did not know, as the steward was a new one in the castle. Then noticing the basket of eggs, he added, "But I think it is the kitchen where you really should go. The baron does not wish to see you peasant folk every time you come with your eggs and cabbages and what-not," and the steward pointed toward the kitchen tower.

But Peasant Johann, though timid, was

also a little stubborn, as many timid people are; so he said again, "I want to see Baron Rudolph."

"Oh, very well!" said the steward curtly, shrugging his shoulders, "as you please. But I warn you, you will find him in no good humor." Then turning to one of the pages, "Go take this man to Baron Rudolph," he said.

Peasant Johann followed the page through the great doorway beneath the carved stone shield and into the castle hall. He had never been in this part of the castle, as always before he had gone only to the kitchen tower, and he looked around with wonder at the richly carved furniture, and the armor and wonderful tapestries hanging on the lofty stone walls.

At one end of the hall was a heavy oaken

table; and there, bent over some papers spread out in front of him, sat Baron Rudolph. There was a frown on his face, and he looked up crossly as the page, sinking on one knee, said, "My lord, here is a peasant who wishes to speak to you."

At this the baron, turning sharply about, fixed his eyes sternly on Peasant Johann, who made a frightened, awkward bow as he plucked off his cap.

Then Baron Rudolph said haughtily, "I dare say you, too, have come trying to beg off from paying your rent! Half of the valley folk are doing the same thing, and it is no use, I tell you! no use!" and the baron's voice rose harshly as he brought his fist down heavily on the table.

"You are all just alike!" he went on. "Always complaining! If the sun shines

you declare your crops are dried up, and if it rains, that they are all mildewed! Nothing suits you! And I would like to know, sirrah! how you expect *me* to live, with all you good-for-nothing folk cheating me out of my just dues! If that is your errand, begone at once! If you have anything else to say, speak, if you can, instead of standing there staring at me like a frightened sheep! I have no time to waste on you whining peasants!" And Baron Rudolph frowned harder than ever as poor Peasant Johann, who had not dared to open his mouth, hung his head and clutching his cap tightly in both hands turned to leave the hall.

As the baron eyed his retreating figure, his rage broke out afresh. "Faugh!" he cried. "Look at you! You are as well-dressed as my castle steward!" As by this time Peas-

ant Johann had reached the door, "Mind!" called the baron sharply, "mind you are to bring your farm produce to the castle as before, or else its equal in money, for I do not believe any of you valley folk are so poor as you pretend! I dare say plenty of you have a good supply of coins hidden away in your woolen stockings or under the thatch of your roofs!"

And as the door closed behind his peasant visitor, the baron was still muttering to himself. "Hm!" he growled, "coming here in their embroidered jackets asking to be let off from their rent! The good-for-nothing cattle!" For Baron Rudolph could not see how patiently and skilfully Frau Hedwig had patched and darned the things put on to show him respect, nor did he know how carefully they would be put away the moment

Peasant Johann reached home and exchanged them for his coarse working-blouse.

Meantime, while Baron Rudolph was still muttering to himself, Peasant Johann had silently made his way to the courtyard. He had almost reached the great gate before he remembered that the goose eggs were still in his basket; and when he crossed over to the door of the kitchen one of the maids called out, "Dear me! Here is Peasant Johann in his Sunday clothes! How now, Johann? How comes it you have a holiday when the rest of us are working?"

But when she caught sight of his face with its sad, frightened look, her laughter stopped, and, guessing the truth, "Never mind," she said kindly in a low voice, as she emptied his basket of eggs, "other folks from the valley have fared as badly as I see you have

done in trying to talk to Baron Rudolph. I surely think the good God will some day punish him for his hardness of heart."

Peasant Johann gave her a grateful look as taking his empty basket he again crossed the courtyard and passed out of the castle gate. As he trudged down the mountain the wind blew sharp and chill, sending the brown and yellow leaves whirling before it and tossing the pine boughs till they sighed mournfully.

Rosechen, down in the meadow with her geese, was watching for her father; and when he came in sight between the wind-swept trees she knew from his bent head and his hopeless air that his errand had been useless. As he crossed the little bridge, she quietly slipped her hand in his with a sympathetic squeeze. Then as her father passed on toward the house, she drew her cape closer

about her shoulders and tried to busy her cold little fingers with her knitting. And as she knitted she walked briskly up and down the brown meadow to keep from shivering.

VIII
WINTER IN THE VALLEY

"ROSECHEN," said her mother a few days later, "there is something I want you to do before the snow comes. Take your basket and go to the forest and see if you cannot find some acorns."

"Why, Mother?" asked Rosechen wonderingly, as she took down the basket from its peg near the door.

"Because, child," answered Frau Hedwig, "you know Baron Rudolph would not listen to your father, and wants his share of what we have just as in good years. And after we have paid him our grain we will have to eke out our own flour with acorns. So hurry and see what you can find. I doubt not other peasant folk are in as sore straits and will be doing the same thing."

Rosechen said no more, but taking her basket set out for the forest beyond the meadows and fields. Two great tears stood in her eyes as she trod the frosty path; for never since she could remember had they been so poor as this.

In the forest almost all the trees had shed

their leaves save the tall pines, wrapped in their dark green mantles, and the oaks, whose russet red foliage would not forsake them through the long winter. Only their fruit of acorns had fallen to the ground, and for these Rosechen searched long and patiently. They were so much the color of the brown leaves covering the sodden earth that it was hard to see them; and when, after hunting for quite a while, at last her basket was filled, most of the acorns she had been able to find were poor and shrunken from the long summer drought or spoiled by lying on the wet leaves.

When the little girl brought them back to the cottage, Frau Hedwig shook her head as she looked them over. "Are they the best you could find, child?" she asked.

"Yes, Mother," answered Rosechen. "I

tried my best," and the tears again lay near her eyes.

"There, there, Rosechen," said her mother, "I know you brought the best you could. The year has been hard on the forest trees as well as on our own fields. And perhaps, too, others have been ahead of you. Nevertheless, even these are better than nothing, and we must lay up what store we may against the winter."

So in the next few days Frau Hedwig sent Rosechen several times more to the forest on the same errand.

Then, by and by, the snow began to fall, and before long the winter began in earnest. And long and bitter it was to prove for all the poor peasant folk of the valley.

Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig tried in every way they could to keep Rosechen and

baby Kaspar from suffering, and to raise what little they were able with which to pay Baron Rudolph. Both of them toiled early and late at the work which was always to be done summer and winter. Frau Hedwig spent her spare moments weaving woolen cloth from the thread she had spun out of the fleeces of the sheep. But when it was finished, she cut off only enough for a warm little dress for Kaspar and one for Rosechen who had outgrown her last year's frock ; then the few yards which were left she carefully folded up and laid aside.

"Why, Mother," said Rosechen, "aren't you going to make the new jacket for Father and the cape you need so much ?"

"No, child," answered Frau Hedwig. "I can mend our old ones so they will last a bit longer ; and perhaps some day Father will

take the cloth and some of the toys he is carving to the village and try to sell them."

The village was at the far end of the valley, beyond the forest. In the summer Rosechen's father and mother tried to go there to the parish church as often as they could on Sundays, though it was a walk of many miles. But at other times the peasant folk round about seldom went to the little place except for supplies of the few things which they could not make for themselves or raise on their tiny farms.

Rosechen rocked the cradle where little Kaspar sat playing; and as he now and then flung his wooden toys on the floor, "Kaspar," she would say, "you must be more careful with your playthings! Father has no time now to be making new ones for you!" But Kaspar would only laugh and crow.

Yet Peasant Johann, though he used every spare moment in carving a little supply of toys to try to sell, had many other things to do besides. He looked over and mended all his farm tools so as to have them in order when spring should come. And then he mended and made over the shoes of heavy leather which they must all have for climbing the steep mountain paths with their sharp rocks and stones. Bare feet or wooden shoes did very well for the valley meadows and fields, but were of little use on the mountains. So Peasant Johann patched and cobbled and did his best to renew the coarse footgear for the family ; and out of some bits of softer old leather which he had left, he even made a little pair of shoes for Kaspar who would soon be toddling about.

Rosechen, too, had many tasks to keep her

busy. She did not go to school because in those days there was no place where peasant children might be taught; nevertheless, her little hands were seldom idle and her mind was all the while storing up the homely wisdom handed down among the peasant folk from generation to generation. And though she had no picture-books, her father and mother told her many a quaint old legend or fairy story of the region, such as they themselves had heard from their fathers and mothers.

Rosechen would croon these over as she tended Kaspar, who would open wide his blue eyes with a puzzled look at his little nurse, for Rosechen took much of the care of the baby brother.

She helped her mother, too, about her household work, and every day she fed her

geese with such scanty food as she could find for them and carried them fresh water from the old well, where she would tug at the frosty sweep till her fingers were numb with cold.

The geese must be kept penned up now while the valley was covered with its white drifts of snow; and very impatient they were, cackling and screaming every time Rosechen opened the door of the stable. "Oh," she would say with a sigh, as she looked at them, "I shall be glad when spring is here and you can go out-of-doors and find things to eat for yourselves!" For the little goose-girl had had hard work to try to satisfy them. And the flock was smaller now than it had been, for more than one had gone to make a dinner for Baron Rudolph.

Frau Hedwig was a careful and frugal housewife, and tried her best to make their

scanty supply of food go as far as possible. Often she and Peasant Johann went without so that there might be bread for Rosechen and Kaspar; though many times the tears came to Frau Hedwig's patient eyes when little Kaspar would hold up his pewter mug and cry for milk when there was none to give him.

So the winter wore slowly away. And one day when the bitterest cold had passed, though still the valley was wrapped in its fleece of snow, Peasant Johann decided to make the trip to the village, of which they had spoken earlier in the year.

He had carved quite a number of toys, wooden sheep such as he had made for Kaspar, little dogs and hares, and even a few tiny cottages like those of the peasant folk. These he arranged in a bundle together with the cloth which Frau Hedwig had woven,

and when Rosechen had brought him his jacket and mittens, he set out; though he did not hope to obtain much for his wares. For the villagers made most things for themselves, as did the peasant folk on the farms, and but few traders came there from outside. Moreover, in many places in Tyrol there were skilful carvers and makers of toys. However, even a little would help, so Peasant Johann trudged off to make the best bargain he could.

The winds sweeping through the valley had blown most of the snow from the frozen brook, so he took his way along its icy path; for the road to the village was poor at best, and now half blocked by the winter drifts.

Rosechen, who had run along with him as far as the brook's edge, waved good-bye, and then as she turned to go back she looked up

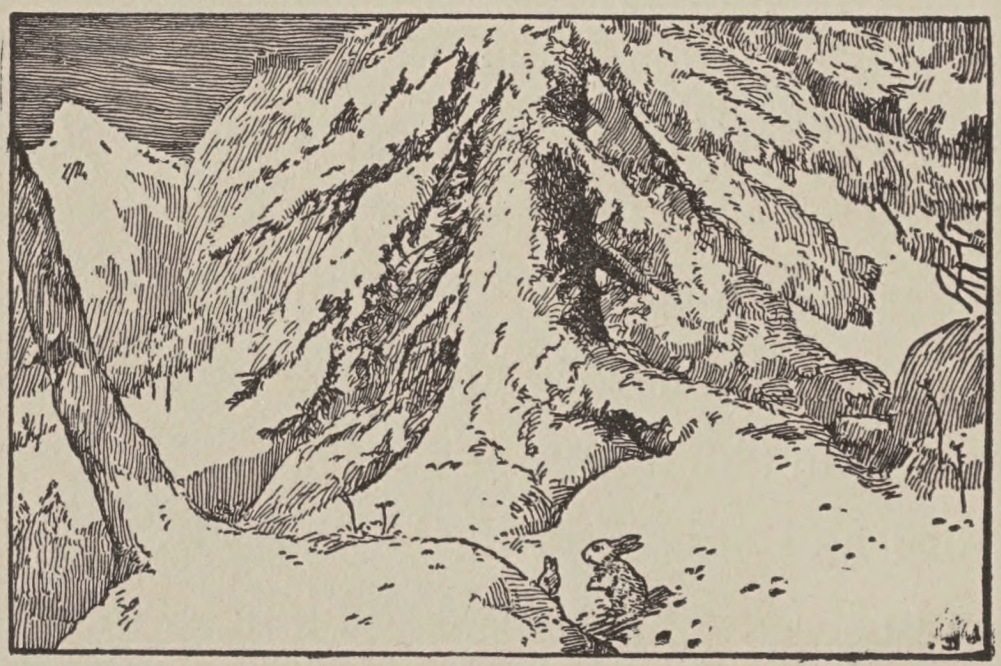
the mountain to the crags of Hohenberg. The old castle loomed high above, bleaker and grayer than ever; its towers and parapets all capped by snow and the peaks beyond rising white and cold in the distance.

"I wonder, I wonder," she thought to herself, "if the poor old magpie is still alive!" For as Rosechen had tended her own starling through the winter, she had thought many times of the forlorn prisoner in the iron cage, and wished that she might see and speak to him and offer him some bit of food as she had so often done through the summer. But as the steep mountain path had usually been deep with snow-drifts, Peasant Johann had made such journeys to the castle as were needful; and as he knew nothing of Rosechen's interest in the magpie, of course he had brought back no word of it.

And the poor captive was forlorn enough. When the bitter cold had come his cage had been carried within the castle so that he might not freeze to death; though this was not because of pity for him, but rather because it was a tradition with the lords of Hohenberg that the cage must never be empty of its prisoner; and if the magpie were to freeze, it would be hard in winter to capture another to take his place. But though the cage hung within the walls, it was in the dismal little entrance room of the tower that held the kitchen; and Rosechen's tender heart would more than ever have pitied the poor prisoner if she could have seen him huddling his head beneath his wings and shivering in the chill air, with no one to speak a kind word to him.

But his one little friend, down there in the

valley, could see nothing but the distant gray walls rising somber against the white mountainside. So presently, after a brisk run around the snowy meadow, Rosechen, with rosy cheeks, went back to the house and helped her mother at her work ; while little Kaspar sat on the floor playing with a tiny gourd and looking at it with wonder as he rattled its dry seeds.



IX
HENRY, THE PAGE, MAKES TROUBLE

IT was nightfall before Peasant Johann returned from the village, for it had been a long and bleak walk against the icy winds.

He had had fairly good luck in selling his wares, and, as he had not expected much,

was satisfied with the few pieces of silver money which he brought back; for he had not spent a penny for the supplies they so much needed and which he usually carried home from the village.

He and Frau Hedwig carefully counted over the silver, and then they carefully put it away. For the peasant folk of those days handled money so seldom that even a trifle seemed very precious to them.

"To-morrow," said Frau Hedwig, "you can go up to the castle and take the silver pieces and half of the last cheese in the press, and that is all we can do until spring. God grant it may come early and be a good season!" she added fervently.

The next morning was sunny and the icy wind had ceased to blow. Peasant Johann took the silver pieces from their hiding-place

and fastened them in a leather pouch which he dropped in one of the pockets of his jacket; then, taking the cheese under his arm, he started off.

Rosechen, as she often did, put her cape around her and walked a little way with him. As she swung along beside him, her father looked down at her fondly, and "Child," he said, "suppose you go with me to the castle. The path is not so bad now, and it is a fine day."

"Oh, yes, Father!" cried Rosechen quickly, "I would like to go!"

"Then run back and get your hood and tell your mother," said Peasant Johann. And as he looked after her little figure flying over the snow, he was glad he would have her company; for he always dreaded a visit to the gloomy crag, and especially after

that day when Baron Rudolph refused to listen to him.

Rosechen on her part was delighted to go, for she had been much shut in the house through the winter; then, too, she had tucked in her apron pocket a bit of bread which she had saved from her breakfast. To be sure it was hard and bitter from the acorn meal which Frau Hedwig had been obliged of late to mix with their little stock of flour; but Rosechen had grown used to it, for the bread of peasant folk is never fine and white like that of people in castles; and she thought the poor old magpie might be glad to have it, as he was fed so little.

The little girl had wanted to ask her father to take this bit of bread to him, but had hesitated to do so; so now she was glad that she was to go along, and hoped she might

see the poor old bird and comfort him a little.

Soon she came running back from the house, having put on her hood and mittens; and the two crossed the frozen brook and began to climb the white path up the mountain. The bare branches of the trees showed like great gray cobwebs against the sparkling white slopes that rose behind them, while here and there tall pines and firs proudly lifted their dark green boughs.

Though there was no sound of birds, and most of the little forest creatures were still in their winter homes, yet here and there sharp prints in the snow showed where a fox had passed, or smaller ones told of hares or weasels. The little torrent no longer sang and tinkled beside the path, but slid silently under its wintry coat of ice; while from the

rocks that edged its summer cascades glistening icicles now caught the morning light till they gleamed like rainbow fringes.

"Oh, Father!" cried Rosechen, as her eyes sparkled with pleasure. "Isn't the mountain beautiful?"

At this Peasant Johann, who had never thought much about it, looked around, and "Yes, child," he agreed, "it is! But," he added, as he noticed near by the footprints of a large hare, "I wish Baron Rudolph would let us trap some of those little beasts for our empty soup-pots!" and he sighed as he trudged on, feeling how hopeless it was to better their lot unless their overlord would show himself kinder.

But in a little while more they had reached the gateway and entered the castle courtyard. Peasant Johann stopped a few minutes to

speak to the old gate-keeper; and Rosechen, running over to where the magpie's cage had hung from the gray tower near by, saw that the dragon hook was empty.

Coming back to her father she took his hand and together they crossed the courtyard to the kitchen entrance. As they stepped within this, Rosechen, whose quick eyes had been watching for her feathered friend, spied his cage fastened against the wall. "Look, Father," she exclaimed, "there is the magpie!"

"What?" said Peasant Johann in bewilderment. "You do not mean the 'wicked magpie'?" and involuntarily he crossed himself; for like most peasants he was superstitious and felt that the magpie must be something evil as he was always called wicked.

"But I don't call him wicked, Father!"

said Rosechen earnestly; and loosing his hand she stepped over to the cage. Just here one of the maids, seeing Peasant Johann from the doorway, called to him, "Good-day, Johann! Come in and tell us the news of the valley!"

And he went into the kitchen where the serving folk asked him many questions of their friends in the cottages at the foot of the mountain; for the crag of Hohenberg was a lonely place at best, and especially in winter when it seemed cut off from the world.

Meantime, Rosechen was smiling at the old magpie as in a low voice she coaxed him to come as close as he could to the bars of his cage. It had been months since he had seen the little girl, yet, though timid at first, he seemed not to have forgotten his only friend. He opened his eyes and holding his head to

one side as he peered out at her, tried feebly to flutter his wings as she spoke to him.

"See!" she said. "I have brought you a bit of bread! Poor magpie! I cannot see into your cage very well," here Rosechen stood on tiptoe trying to do so, "but I am afraid you are half starved! We have not much, either," she added, "but I have brought you some of my breakfast and I hope you can eat it!" Then with another smile and a nod, she followed her father into the kitchen.

"Why, Rosechen!" exclaimed her friend Wilhelm, the serving-boy, in surprise. "I did not know you were along!"

"She stopped to look at the wicked magpie," explained her father. Then, after they had all talked a while longer, he asked for the castle steward and delivered to him the cheese and the pieces of silver, thankful that

this time he did not have to see Baron Rudolph, of whom he stood in great dread.

Then saying good-bye to their friends, who called after them many messages to Frau Hedwig, Rosechen and her father left the kitchen and passed through the little room to the outer entrance.

Peasant Johann's mind was so busy trying to remember all the things he was to tell Frau Hedwig that he did not notice when Rosechen, with another smile, waved her hand in good-bye to the old magpie still peering at her as he pecked now and then at the bread she had brought him. He did not notice either, nor did Rosechen, a page who had been standing near the kitchen door as they came in, and who now looked at them maliciously as they crossed the courtyard.

"So," he was saying to himself, "she is the

one who used to feed that old magpie last summer! And now I have caught her at it! Baron Rudolph will be angry enough when he hears of it, and I mean that he shall!" and Henry, the page, nodded his head hatefully.

Now Henry it was who had to give the magpie such little care as it received, and he disliked this greatly. And he himself was disliked by most of the castle folk; for he was haughty and disagreeable and was known among them both as a tale-bearer and as untruthful.

Several times through the summer Henry had noticed little things in the magpie's cage; a withered lettuce leaf or the stones of the cherries Rosechen had thrust between the iron bars told that some one else had been feeding him. Henry had wondered a little, as he

knew very well none of the castle people would dare to give anything to the wicked magpie, even if they pitied it. Once when he had asked about it in the kitchen, no one knew; and though Wilhelm, the boy scullion, guessed that it might be kind-hearted little Rosechen, he loyally kept his thoughts to himself, for he knew Baron Rudolph would be angry with any one who interfered with the traditional custom of the castle that the magpie must be given only enough to keep it alive and must be shunned by every one.

But Henry, now that he had found out who had had the boldness to be kind to the poor prisoner, determined to tell Baron Rudolph the first chance he found. He meant to do this partly because he was of a malicious disposition and seemed to enjoy getting other people into trouble, and partly, also, because

he had noticed that Rosechen was a friend of Wilhelm's and he and Wilhelm had had several bitter quarrels.

And Henry's chance was not long in coming. The next day the baron sent for him to do some service in the great hall, and before he left, bending on one knee, "My lord!" he said. When Baron Rudolph gave him attention, he began his speech, as do most people who have something unpleasant to tell, by saying, "My lord, I feel that I ought to tell you something. All summer some one outside the castle has been bringing dainties to feed the wicked magpie. You know I have charge of him. I did not tell you before because, though I tried my best to find out who did it, I could not be sure until yesterday when I saw a little peasant girl named Rosechen giving him a large piece of fine white

bread!" For so Henry's imagination made the most of Rosechen's humble little offerings.

At this Baron Rudolph, who had been listening in amazement, burst out, "*What?* Feeding the wicked magpie with *dainties* and *fine white bread?* How dares she!" he thundered, his ill temper rising with every word. "The hussy! Who is she, this Rosechen?"

"My lord," answered Henry, "she is the daughter of Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig who live down in the valley near the bridge. She has often come to the castle on errands."

"Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig!" cried the baron, catching at the names. "Ha, yes, I remember! That sheep-eyed Johann came here last autumn to beg off from paying his rent, like all the rest of those good-for-nothing varlets of the valley, claiming they were half starved! The impudent rascals! Dainties

and fine white bread, indeed! And enough for their children to feed to robber birds they have no business to meddle with!"

And so the baron stormed, ending by declaring that the next time his rent came due Peasant Johann should pay roundly for Rosechen's impertinence in feeding the wicked magpie, and that Rosechen herself should not be allowed within the castle grounds.

And Henry left the hall, well satisfied with the trouble he had stirred up.

X

BARON RUDOLPH GOES RIDING

DOWN in the white valley Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig, all unconscious of Baron Rudolph's special anger with them, were doing their best to bring their little household safely through the winter which was slowly but surely wearing away.

Before long the snow began to soften and melt, trickling down the sunny mountain slopes with a low music very sweet in the ears of all the poor peasant folk who had struggled through the bitter months gone by. Soon the green grass began to cover the meadows and every day Rosechen could gather a little cluster of blue violets and delicate harebells, while by the edge of the brook yellow buttercups splashed the ground with gold.

Sweet-voiced cuckoos and linnets and blackbirds sang through the valley, and everybody tried to forget the hardships and suffering of the winter and to take fresh heart and courage from the bright spring air about them. Though, indeed, it was not easy altogether to forget their hardships, as the cruel dearth of winter still troubled them

and would until they could gather food from their little fields and gardens.

Nevertheless the peasant folk were a brave and hardy people and used to privations; and while many had begun to murmur at the exactions of Baron Rudolph, none dared do so openly, but all strove to bear them as patiently as they might, and toiled hard to make the most of their little farms.

And none worked more industriously than Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig and Rosechen; while as for baby Kaspar, he was the busiest of all, toddling to and fro under everybody's feet, carrying things here and there where they did not belong, and altogether seeming to feel that his work was quite the most important of any.

Peasant Johann had planted his fields with anxious care and, with Frau Hedwig's help,

had set out the garden which was already growing, watched every day by their longing eyes; for the little supply of food, which by Frau Hedwig's frugal care had lasted them through the winter, was now almost gone. The sheep and cow and Rosechen's geese, however, were faring better for the time, for the meadow grass was in its first plenty.

The wind blew softly through the valley rippling the green of the meadows, and then entering the forest beyond, it rustled the fragrant boughs of pines and hemlocks and stirred the young leaves and rocked the branches where already there were many nests filled with speckled eggs or with the wide-open yellow bills of young fledglings. For the birds built their nests earlier here in the more sheltered parts of the forest

where it spread across the valley. But even where it clambered up the steep mountain slopes the buds were now breaking and here and there a tuft of blue forget-me-nots twinkled beside the rushing torrent.

Yes, even the crags of Hohenberg looked less rugged glimpsed through the lacy green of young leaves. Within the castle enclosure the grass was fresh and bright; and for the while, under the sweet spring air, the place seemed a little less gloomy.

On one of these breezy mornings Henry, the page, had taken the magpie's cage out and hung it once more from the dragon hook in the old gray wall. As he felt the fresh air the poor prisoner raised his head from beneath his wings and opened his beak as if to drink it in. For wretched though his lot was, it was yet a little better to be out-of-

doors, even unsheltered from storm and wind, than to stay in the dismal tower room where he had spent the winter.

Henry had just placed the cage and, with a disdainful look, turned to go when the steward called him to come and attend Baron Rudolph.

For even the baron had felt something of the stir of spring, and had decided to go out for a ride on his horse.

This had been led into the courtyard saddled and bridled, and Henry helped his master to mount; the groom, who often followed him on horseback, had been dismissed by the baron, who happened to be in one of the moods when he wished to ride by himself.

But as he took the bridle in his hand and Sigrid, the horse, tossing his head spiritedly, stepped prancing toward the castle gate, the

old gate-keeper watching him shook his head.

"To be sure," he said to the steward, "Baron Rudolph has always been a fine horseman, but he is not so young as he once was! Nor is he overstrong either," added the porter with another shake of his head, "and yonder horse is full of springtime mettle. Young Master Conrad would be fitter to handle him." And the old man sighed as he thought of the kind-eyed youth who had always had a pleasant word for him, and who might now be suffering poverty and distress because of his father's anger.

Meantime, Baron Rudolph rode down the steep bridle-path to the grassy valley below. Here Sigrid, who with quivering nostrils had been snuffing the fresh spring air, flung up his heels and broke into so lively a gallop

that it was all the baron could do to control him to a trot when they entered the narrow bridle-path leading through the forest at the far end of the valley.

Indeed, before long Sigrid was obliged to slacken his pace to a walk as he followed impatiently the baron's guiding along the path; for as it was but little travelled at best, it was now almost impassable in places because of the broken boughs blown to the ground by the winds of winter and which had not yet been cleared away.

In this way they had gone some distance into the forest when suddenly from under a dead branch lying across the bridle-path out scurried a little brown hare.

Now, of course, big strong Sigrid should have known perfectly well that the frightened little creature could not possibly harm him.

But Sigrid had not been shut in his stable all winter for nothing; and now, full of pent-up energy, he was ready at the least excuse to fling up his heels and behave as if something really terrifying had befallen him. So when the little hare suddenly went scampering between his feet, Sigrid reared on his haunches and gave such a jump that Baron Rudolph, who had slackened his rein after entering the forest, was thrown violently to the ground.

It had all happened so quickly that Sigrid himself scarcely realized what he had done; and, after a little snort of surprise at finding himself riderless, he wandered off quietly enough and presently coming to an opening in the trees, where the grass grew fresh and green, began grazing as though nothing unusual had taken place.

Meantime, Baron Rudolph lay very still,

his eyes closed and his face very white. From a wound in his forehead blood was slowly trickling; but of this he knew nothing; for the fall had at first stunned him, and then, on partly recovering himself, a sharp pain in his shoulder had caused him to swoon. So there he lay, quite helpless, and with no one in sight to aid him.

XI

HOW THE FIGHT WITH THE HAWK LED ROSECHEN TO THE BARON

BUT if there were no human beings about, there were plenty of little forest creatures; though these were all so intent upon their own affairs that what had befallen Baron Rudolph was small matter to them. And of all these little forest creatures none

were more taken up with their own anxieties at that moment than a family of magpies living in a large dome-shaped nest which was perched in the topmost boughs of a tall hemlock-tree not far distant from where the baron had fallen.

In this magpie home were six nestlings which were not quite able to fly away as yet, but which had grown so large that there was now scarcely room for them beneath the curving roof their parents had so carefully built. These nestlings, crowding each other, as do all young birds almost ready to fly, had at last pushed one of their number to the edge of the nest. There he poised uncertainly for a moment, and then, with a startled fluttering of his wings, down he tumbled.

But though his wings were large enough to let him down safely from the tall tree-top,

they were not yet strong enough to raise him up again without some help or at least encouragement from his mother magpie. So there he lay on the ground squawking with surprise at finding himself suddenly on the strange brown earth which before he had only peeped at from the door of the high nest.

Now, when the young magpie tumbled down, his mother, who had left the nest for only a few moments, happened to be in another tree-top not far away where she was searching for some food for her family. And it happened also that a large hawk came sailing along at the same time. Both of these heard the distressed cries of the young nestling, and both had very sharp eyes also.

The hawk, which was farthest away, at once began wheeling down trying to see just

where the unlucky little magpie had fallen, intending then with a sudden swoop to snatch him up as a tender morsel for his breakfast. But at the same moment the quick ears of the mother magpie heard the cries of the young one her bright eyes spied the hawk, and instantly she began to shriek at the top of her voice, calling for help in the language which all magpies understand.

And of the many in the forest those nearest quickly answered her; for magpies are courageous birds and loyal to each other when in trouble. First came the father magpie, who had been farther away searching for worms and so had not at first known what had happened; and after him flew a number of others who had heard the cries for help, and in another moment, amid a great shrieking and chattering of angry birds, the hawk

found himself so fiercely attacked that, although much larger and stronger than any one of them, he was obliged to let go the young magpie which he had already seized and was trying to carry away. Indeed, he was glad to spread his great wings and take flight from his tormentors that chased him some distance till he soared off high up in the blue sky.

Meantime, the father and mother magpies, still chattering, had succeeded in coaxing the young nestling up to a low overhanging bough; and there they perched for a while, panting and breathless and quite exhausted from their struggle, their ragged and blood-spattered feathers showing how bravely they had fought.

And clinging there to the bough as it gently swayed in the spring breeze, they were

quite too worn out to notice that some one was looking at them with much interest. They had been so excited fighting off the hawk that they did not know that their loud shrieks and cries had been heard by a little girl named Rosechen who happened to be in the forest that morning.

Now, the reason Rosechen was there was because Frau Hedwig had found that day that she was out of fagots for the fire and so had sent the little girl with a basket to bring some from the forest.

Rosechen had been busy for some time and, as she often did when sent on such an errand, she not only filled her basket but gathered besides quite a heap which she piled under the trees for her father to fetch home later; for it took a long while to hunt the dry branches which had fallen to the ground, and

she could thus save Peasant Johann much time to work elsewhere.

Rosechen had worked so steadily that, growing tired at last, she sat down to rest under a great oak-tree at the edge of a green glade. But no sooner had she seated herself than her attention had been attracted by the commotion made by the magpies. Though some distance away she could hear them quite plainly; and as something unusual seemed to be happening among them, Rosechen's curiosity was aroused; for she was always interested in birds and their ways.

So she jumped to her feet, and hurrying as fast as she could in the direction of the noise, reached the spot just as the hawk was being successfully driven off. She saw how hard the struggle had been, and when it was over would have clapped her hands for the

bravery of the father and mother magpies in saving their little one, if she had not been afraid of frightening them. So, after watching them a moment longer, she turned softly away and started to leave the forest.

But she had gone only a few steps when suddenly she started back with a cry! For there right in front of her lay Baron Rudolph, who had come out of his swoon though still his eyes were closed. Now, hearing Rosechen's cry, he opened them and uttered a faint moan.

Rosechen, who at once recognized the baron, was terrified at finding him thus, and for a moment stood irresolute, scarcely knowing what to do. But then, after another gasp of bewilderment, her wits came back to her and she realized that she must do something to help as soon as possible. So gathering up

her courage, she stepped timidly to the baron's side and said in a low voice, "Are you much hurt, sir?"

But Baron Rudolph was too weak and dazed to answer.

Here Rosechen, seeing the blood on his white face, hastily undid her little apron and hurrying to the edge of a small stream which she knew was not far away, she wet it in the cool water and coming back pressed it to the baron's forehead. In a few minutes he revived enough to ask faintly, "Where is my horse?"

"I do not know, sir," answered Rosechen, and "Did you fall from him?" she asked.

"I suppose so," said Baron Rudolph, beginning to realize what had happened. Then as he tried to rise, he fell back with a groan of pain.

Rosechen, who had been thinking quickly, here sprang to her feet, and "Oh, sir," she said, "I must find some one to help you! I know where a charcoal-burner lives, near the edge of the forest, and I will run to him."

And off she sped to where she knew was a little weather-beaten hut among the great trees. As she came near it, "Uncle Carl! Uncle Carl!" she called in an anxious voice; for the old charcoal-burner was a friend of her father and she had always called him "Uncle Carl."

Soon a kindly-eyed old man with his face smudged with soot came from his work near the hut, and "Hey, child!" he said in surprise, "what is the matter?"

"Oh," cried Rosechen breathlessly, "Baron Rudolph is hurt! I think he fell from his horse! Come quickly!" And seizing his

hand she dragged along Uncle Carl trying his best to make his stiff old knees keep up with her flying pace.

When they came to where Baron Rudolph was lying, the charcoal-burner, who was really very skilful in dealing with hurts, made it his first care to staunch the blood still oozing from the baron's forehead; then gently he tried to lift him. But from the groans of the wounded man, he decided that one of his shoulder bones must be broken; and presently, too, the baron discovered that he could not use his right foot, as the ankle seemed to have been wrenched in the fall.

When Uncle Carl found that this was the case, he told Rosechen to hurry back to her home and get her father's help to carry the baron thither. "For," said Uncle Carl, "he could not ride his horse, and it would never

do to try to carry him, hurt as he is, up the steep mountain road. I could not make him comfortable in my poor hut, and your house is the nearest other place. So tell your mother to make ready."

Rosechen darted off, and by the time Peasant Johann reached the place where the baron was lying the charcoal-burner had brought the sheepskin covering from his bed in the hut and spread it out by his side; placing the wounded man gently on this, between them they carried him out of the forest and across the fields and meadows to the home of Rosechen.

The little girl, after sending her father to Uncle Carl, had stayed to help her mother make ready for their unexpected guest. Both were greatly excited at the thought of having Baron Rudolph under their roof. "Oh, Mother," said Rosechen in an awed voice,

"do you suppose he will be angry to be brought here, and scold us?"

"I do not know, child," answered Frau Hedwig, as she spread fresh sheets of her own weaving on the great bed in the corner of the room. "But there seems nowhere else to take him, and we will do the best we can for him, for he is hurt and helpless. And we must show kindness to those our roof shelters," she added with the true spirit of hospitality;—though in her heart she was not a little frightened at the prospect of nursing the lord of Hohenberg in their humble home.

XII

BARON RUDOLPH BEGINS TO THINK

BARON RUDOLPH had been for several weeks in the home of Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig. The broken bone of his shoulder and the hurt to his ankle were both mending, and the fever into which the shock of the accident had at first thrown him had

passed away. To be sure, as the old gate-keeper had said that morning when he set out on Sigrid's back, the baron was no longer young; yet in spite of this, the skill of the village doctor, and most of all the wise and careful nursing of Frau Hedwig, were slowly but surely restoring him to health.

And as he lay there waiting to grow strong enough to ride up the mountain to his castle (but on a safer horse than Sigrid!), he had a great deal of time to think about things. Though at first he was too ill to notice what went on about him, as the pain left him more and more he began to observe the daily life of the little household.

The great bed with the red and blue cross-stitched curtains had been given up to the baron, and the others had gone to sleep in the low-roofed loft above the living-room.

Peasant Johann had carried little Kaspar's cradle thither, but the rest had to be content with beds made of armfuls of straw spread upon the floor.

Every morning before daybreak Frau Hedwig and Peasant Johann would softly slip down the narrow stair to the living-room and make their breakfast of hard bread, and then go about their work as noiselessly as possible so as not to disturb Baron Rudolph; though often he was awake and quietly watching them. A little later Rosechen would bring Kaspar down, and if the day was fine would take him out-of-doors and tend him as she watched her geese, so his noisy play might not annoy the baron; for everybody was very careful to make everything as comfortable as possible for their uninvited guest.

Baron Rudolph's food was sent down daily

from the castle kitchen; and when he began to notice things he could not help but see how poor and scanty was the fare of the others. One morning, having a fancy to taste it, he asked Frau Hedwig for some of their breakfast.

"It is only bread, sir," she answered, surprised at his request and that he was awake so early. "And," she added, "you would not like it, sir."

But as he insisted, she brought him a piece. "Bah!" he said, making a wry face as he tasted it. "Is that what you call bread?"

Frau Hedwig flushed, for she prided herself on her skill as a housewife. "My lord," she replied sadly, "I cannot make bread like that of your castle when I have only flour made from blighted grain and acorns."

Baron Rudolph's own face flushed at this

and he said no more; for he began to remember how he had forced the peasant folk of the valley to pay him with their wheat, as always, in spite of the hard season; and he now knew that they must eat bitter bread so that his might be fine and white. But though he said no more to Frau Hedwig, he took care to order food enough brought down from the castle to supply not only his own wants but those of the family also.

He had never before realized how hard were the lives of these humble people. And as day after day he saw how bravely and patiently they worked and tried to make the best of the little they had, he began more and more to feel very uncomfortable as he thought of his own hardness to them. He had called them lazy and good-for-nothing as he looked down on them from his castle

on the crag; but now that he had been for several weeks living in a peasant home, he saw for himself how unjust had been his thoughts of them.

At first, after the baron had been brought to the cottage, he had said but little, merely making his wants known in his usual cross and commanding way. But as more and more he now came to know the daily life of those about him, his temper began to soften wonderfully.

And though he had not around him the handsome and costly things to which he was accustomed at the castle, yet the pretty touches of carving and needlework with which Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig had beautified their humble belongings, all these were not lost upon Baron Rudolph now that he really looked at them and

understood with what toil-wearied fingers they had been done for love of the little home.

But most of all he found it unexpectedly pleasant to be so close to the kindly simple-hearted life of this peasant home. Up at the castle every one waited upon him and obeyed his orders in a silent, frightened way; and no one, not even the baron himself, had known how terribly lonely he was. But here in the cottage there was no room to put him off by himself, and to his own surprise he found that he really enjoyed being a part of the humble life there.

They were all kind to him not only because he was their master but because they all had warm, sympathetic hearts; and now that he was hurt and helpless, they were genuinely sorry for him in spite of his old treatment of them. Moreover, their spirit of true hospital-

ity made them try, as Frau Hedwig had said they would, to do their best for any one, no matter whom, seeking shelter beneath their roof.

And Baron Rudolph could not help but feel all this, and grow more and more ashamed of himself. Gradually he lost his overbearing manner, and every day his voice became kinder and more pleasant.

Baby Kaspar, who could only prattle a little and thought everybody his friend, would often come and bring his playthings to the side of the great high-posted bed and offer them to the baron. The first time Frau Hedwig saw him, "Kaspar!" she cried in dismay, as she hastened to snatch him away. "You must not do that!"

But to her amazement Baron Rudolph had said in a kind voice, "Do not take him away. I like to have him friendly."

Indeed, the more and more Baron Rudolph watched Kaspar toddling about shaking his gourd rattle, more and more he thought of his own son Conrad, and how he had just such blue eyes as Kaspar's, and how he used to toddle about with his coral rattle with its fine silver bells, and how he had loved him and how proud he had been of him. And then he would wonder where Conrad was, and if life went hard with him. And this was more than Baron Rudolph had done for a long time; for he had shut up his heart so close against Conrad that he would not allow even a thought of him to enter. But now he would watch little Kaspar with a dreamy, longing look in his eyes; and once Frau Hedwig overheard him softly call him "Conrad," by mistake, because he was thinking so hard of his own boy.

And if Kaspar and Baron Rudolph had become good friends, Rosechen, too, was on the best of terms with him. Though shy and timid during the first weeks of the baron's illness, as he grew better and more kindly disposed toward them all, the little girl had more and more lost her awe of him. Indeed, she found herself so much more at ease with him than she had ever dreamed she could be, that often in speaking to him she would forget to say "My lord," as her mother had told her she should; and Baron Rudolph, knowing she meant no disrespect, would smile and really enjoyed it; for most people like a change, especially if from customs that are stiff and formal.

Often Rosechen would take her knitting and drawing her wooden stool to his bedside, she would tell him the little adventures of the day, or perhaps some old legend or fairy story

such as all the peasant children knew; and Baron Rudolph would listen quietly, often wondering that he found it all so agreeable.

If the people at the castle could have peeped in at such times they would have stared with surprise; yet not so much as they might have done some weeks before. For those of them who had come down on errands had now for quite a while been bringing back wonderful tales of how the baron had changed. Though the rest of the castle folk could scarcely believe it true, yet they hoped with all their hearts that it might be; for life up there had been dreary enough for many years.

XIII

ROSECHEN ASKS SOME QUESTIONS

THE only one who was not pleased with these tales about Baron Rudolph was Henry, the page; he had taken a malicious pleasure in making the baron angry with Rosechen, and he did not like it that they had become friends. He did not quite believe

it, however; so one day when the steward happened to ask him to carry some message to the baron, he did not object as he probably would have done, because he rather wanted to see for himself how things were.

When Henry reached the cottage he strode in, paying no attention to Frau Hedwig's greeting. And then, after delivering his message to the baron, he stared around the room so contemptuously and was so insolent to every one that Baron Rudolph's anger was aroused and he said sternly, "Henry! You are an impudent young rascal, and when I go back to Hohenberg I shall see that you mend your manners!"

Henry turned scarlet with rage and mortification, but he dared not answer back. So presently turning on his heel he haughtily left the house; and Frau Hedwig, though too

polite to say anything, could not help but smile to herself as she closed the door.

Meantime Henry, furiously repeating to himself, "Pooh! I'm not afraid of him! He has lost his wits in that wretched hovel!" stalked angrily across the meadow till presently spying Rosechen tending her geese at the far end of it, his face brightened up; for here was somebody he knew he could be disagreeable to, and he seemed to delight in saying hateful things to people.

He had been disappointed in not seeing Rosechen in the cottage, so now crossing to where she was, he pointed his finger at her and "Shame! Shame!" he cried. "You fed and petted the wicked magpie and brought ill luck to Baron Rudolph! He found out about what you were doing, though, a long time ago, and he ordered the gate-keeper not to let

you step your foot inside the castle courtyard! I carried the orders myself!" he ended triumphantly.

Poor Rosechen, who knew nothing of how Henry had told the baron weeks before about her feeding the magpie, stopped still, listening in amazed surprise. Tears sprang to her eyes as she stood silent for some moments not knowing what to answer to Henry's speech. At last she sobbed out, "I don't believe it!"

"You don't?" said Henry, tossing his head. "Have you tried lately to get into the gate?"

"No-o!" sobbed Rosechen.

"Well, you'll see! Bad-luck bringer!" he added tauntingly.

"But," protested Rosechen, trying to dry her eyes, "I don't see how my giving that poor starved magpie little things to eat, or

speaking to him, could bring any bad luck to Baron Rudolph!"

"Yes," cried Henry, delighted to see he was tormenting her, "but it did! That's what made him fall off of his horse and nearly get killed! It was all your fault, every bit of it!" he added exultingly.

But Rosechen was not entirely convinced; for, unlike most peasant folk, she was not naturally very superstitious. "Mother said it was ill luck to speak to the magpie," she faltered at last, "but I am sure she only meant it was ill luck to whoever did it, and I was not afraid. And he looked so miserable, I *had* to pet him!"

"You *had* to pet him, did you?" sneered Henry. "Well, you just wait and see! You brought the accident on the baron, and though maybe *your* bad luck hasn't begun

yet,—you just wait!" And wagging his head with a knowing look which seemed to mean all sorts of dreadful things were going to happen to her, Henry moved off across the meadow, quite cheered up because he had made some one unhappy.

For poor Rosechen was very miserable and unhappy. But by and by she dried her eyes and tried to forget what Henry had said. Yet though, when she returned to the cottage, she said nothing about it, she could not keep her thoughts entirely from it.

That same afternoon she and Kaspar were left to look after Baron Rudolph while her father and mother were working in the fields.

Kaspar was playing with his wooden toys, the baron was dozing in the high-posted bed, and near by Rosechen sat on her little stool knitting.

As she worked she was thinking of the baron forbidding her to come to the castle. "I wonder if he really did?" she said to herself. "But then," she added as she looked at his sleeping face with its now kindly expression, "I don't believe he would now! And I don't believe, either, that the poor old magpie had anything to do with his getting hurt!

"And," she went on, "I am sure if it hadn't been for those other magpies in the forest I would never have found the baron; —and perhaps—perhaps they were the children or grandchildren of the old magpie! I wonder if they were?" And Rosechen was so absorbed in her thoughts that presently Baron Rudolph, who had wakened and was watching her, said, "What are you thinking about, child?"

Rosechen answered him almost as if she

were still talking to herself, "I was thinking, sir, wouldn't it be queer if the magpies that made me find you that day in the forest were the children or grandchildren of your magpie! Do you suppose they were?"

"Of *my* magpie?" repeated Baron Rudolph in surprise. "Do you mean the wicked magpie?" Then all at once he remembered what Henry had told him about the daughter of Peasant Johann feeding and petting the poor old bird, and how angry it had made him. In the weeks of his illness he had forgotten about it; but yes, Henry had said her name was Rosechen and this must be the very child. Though Baron Rudolph did not like it that any one had dared to break the old custom of the castle and pet the prisoner that for so many generations had been doomed to neglect and scanty fare, yet now that he owed

so much to the little girl who had brought help to him in the forest, and since, moreover, he had grown fond of her, he could not be very cross with her. Nevertheless, without knowing it, he stiffened up a bit as he repeated with a touch of his old sternness, "Do you mean the wicked magpie?"

Rosechen looked up surprised, for Baron Rudolph seldom spoke crossly now. "Yes, sir," she said hesitatingly, after a pause,—"only I don't see why everybody calls him 'wicked.' He did not steal Lady Irma's necklace," she finished timidly.

But Baron Rudolph's thoughts had gone back to the first part of Rosechen's speech, that about the magpies of the forest. Now the baron knew that Rosechen had found him there in the forest where she had gone to gather fagots; but no one had happened to

tell him about the magpies whose cries in fighting off the hawk had first drawn her to the spot. So, his curiosity aroused, he said, "I do not understand what you mean by the magpies that made you find me that day I was hurt?"

Rosechen told him about how she had heard the noise they made trying to save the young nestling from the hawk, and how she had come to the place and so found him. "Oh, sir," she said as she finished, "they must think as much of their children as people do, they fought that big hawk so bravely!"

Baron Rudolph winced as Rosechen thus unconsciously reminded him that even the birds he had despised had risked their lives and shown more love for their nestling than he himself had shown for his own son whom he had wilfully driven from home.

But Rosechen went on, "And I was just wondering if those magpies were any relation to your magpie at the castle. It would be so queer if they were! And," she continued eagerly, "I thought perhaps you would let your magpie go free on account of it, because Uncle Carl says if the magpies hadn't brought me when they did you would have bled to death!"

At this Baron Rudolph was quite silent. But Rosechen did not notice, for as she knitted on her thoughts were absorbed with the story of the stolen necklace. She had always been interested in it, and had asked her mother many questions which the latter could not answer. So now she said to Baron Rudolph, "Has there really *always* been a magpie in that iron cage ever since they found the necklace?"

"Yes," answered the baron, without saying more.

"And how long has the one up there now been in it, sir?"

"I do not remember," replied the baron shortly. "Some years, I suppose."

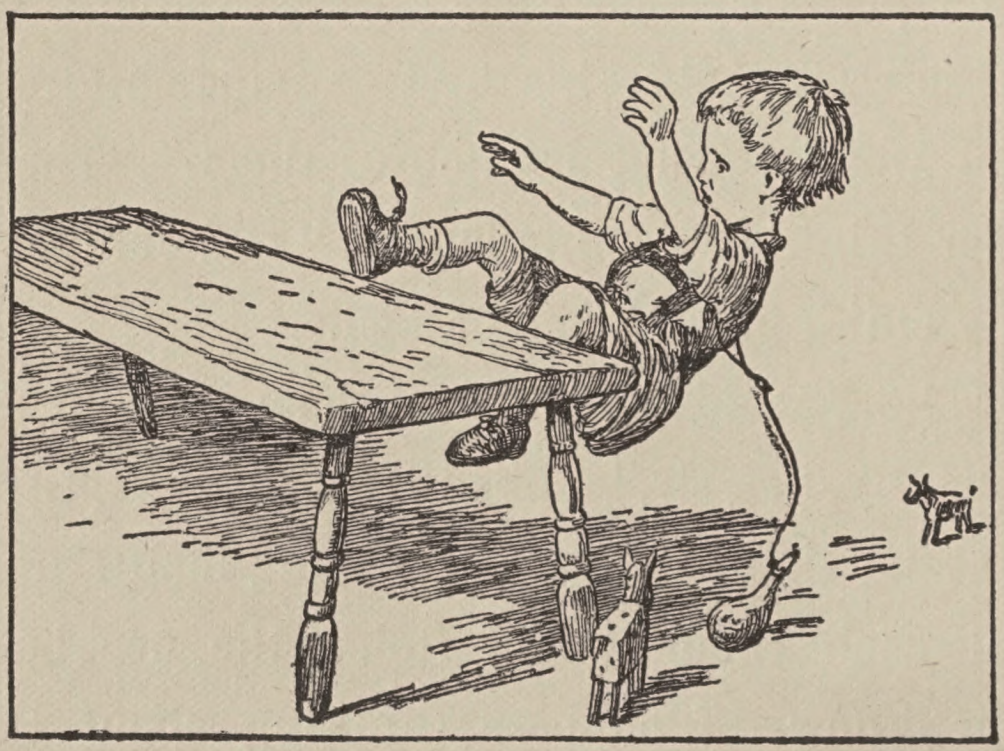
"He must have been," said Rosechen with conviction, "he looks so old and lonesome." Here she had to stop and count her stitches; then presently she went on, "I wonder if he doesn't remember his nest and his children, and wonder what became of them." Then, after thinking a while longer, "Did Jan have any children, sir?" she asked.

"Jan?" said the baron, with a puzzled look.

"Why, yes, sir," replied Rosechen, surprised that he should ask; "the young man Baron Friedrich thought had stolen the necklace, you know. I suppose thinking about the

magpie's children made me wonder if Jan had any and what became of them when he died in the dungeon."

To this Baron Rudolph answered nothing at all. And as at that moment Kaspar fell off of a bench to which he had climbed, and began to cry, Rosechen hastily put down her knitting and ran to pick him up and comfort him.



XIV
BARON RUDOLPH'S RESOLVE

THE reason Baron Rudolph had not answered Rosechen's last questions about Jan and if he had left any children was because he did not know what to say.

The truth was the story had been handed down more faithfully among the peasant folk

to whom Jan belonged than by the lords of the castle. For the two hundred years since the time the necklace was stolen, each of the barons of Hohenberg had simply accepted the fact that a magpie must be kept in the iron cage; and, like many old customs, they jealously kept it up without really paying much attention to the beginning of it. Baron Rudolph did not even remember the name of the youth who had suffered death until Rosechen's questions reminded him of it.

And these questions about Jan and what had become of his family, her pity for him and for the poor old magpie up at the castle and her plea that he set it free because other magpies had unwittingly saved his life, all these started him off on a new train of thought.

Indeed, the baron was very busy these days

thinking about many things, and in a different way from the way he had ever before thought of them. It was really wonderful how it all had improved him and how those weeks spent in the peasant home had made him more kind-hearted and more just than he had been in all his life.

It seemed as if there had awakened in him the best traits of his race. For the lords of Hohenberg, though often harsh and hot-tempered, had been quite as often fair and just, as indeed was Baron Rudolph himself in his younger days. And now that Rosechen had reminded him of the story of the stolen necklace and the magpies, he began really to consider the matter for the first time since he could remember.

Though he smiled at her suggestion that the magpies of the forest might be the chil-

dren or grandchildren of the wicked magpie, nevertheless, what she had told him had given him a different opinion of the birds he had always been taught to scorn. And as he lay there in his bed, the more he thought of the prisoner in the iron cage the more he began to see how, as Rosechen had said, the poor old magpie ought not to be called "wicked," but rather the custom itself. That it was both foolish and wicked to keep on generation after generation imprisoning helpless birds, all because, two hundred years before, one of their kind had stolen a pearl necklace!

Then presently he began to think of Jan and Rosechen's questions about his family and what had become of them. Now Baron Rudolph could reason things out as well as anybody when he set his mind to it; so now

that he *had* set his mind to it, if one could have read his thoughts they would have been something like this: "If my great-great-great-great-grandfather, Baron Friedrich, wished to make amends for having unjustly imprisoned and caused the death of a young peasant, why did he not try, so far as possible, to make it up by showing special favor to the young man's family, to his father or mother, or children, if he had any? Would not this have been a better way to atone for his cruelty and injustice than to be unjust and cruel to a lot of magpies who had nothing to do with the matter? Yes, it is quite sure Baron Friedrich made a mistake in not doing something for the young man's family,—which I never heard that he did. But of course it is too late for that now."

Then all at once, deep down in his heart,

something seemed to say to him, "But *is* it too late?"

"Why, yes!" answered Baron Rudolph's other self. "Jan's family have been dead and gone this long and long ago!"

"To be sure!" said the first self. "But are there not plenty of peasant folk still in the valley, and do not you, the lord of Hohenberg, to-day represent your great-great-ever-so-great-grandfather Baron Friedrich?"

"Yes," answered Baron Rudolph to himself.

"Then," went on that part of him that was thinking things out, "why cannot you make amends for Baron Friedrich's unkindness and injustice to *one* peasant in his time by being kind and just to *all* the peasants of your day? That would be very much better than to go on shutting up magpies, a custom which you

have discovered never punishes the real thief and does no one any good."

"Yes," agreed Baron Rudolph.

"And," went on his thinking self, "just because you have inherited the caged magpie is really no reason why you should hand it down to your son Conrad."

And, strangely enough, Baron Rudolph did not even start when he said Conrad's name over to himself. For, without really realizing it, since he had been so long a part of the humble but happy family life around him, he had made up his mind to find Conrad and his young wife and bring them back to the castle. Perhaps, too, he was ashamed to think that even the magpies of the forest had shown more love for their children than he.

But the voice in his heart went on, "Yes, it will be much better to do away with that

foolish old magpie cage, and, instead, make things easier for all your peasants for the sake of Jan. Besides, you are especially the one to do this, for you know very well by this time that you yourself, though you have never caused the death of one of them, have yet for many years been harsh and unjust to them."

Though this last was hard for Baron Rudolph to admit even to himself, yet he was obliged to, for he knew it was true. "Yes," he agreed, "I have been harsh and unkind to my people; but that was when I did not know them. Now I have learned how worthy they are, and how far more honest and hard-working and good-hearted than I ever supposed, and from now on I will try to be a better master to them!"

And this resolve was the most fortunate thing in the world for the poor peasants of the

valley. For when once he made up his mind to do a thing, Baron Rudolph would always take a great deal of trouble to carry out his word.

Of course all these things ought to have occurred to some one of the lords of Hohenberg long before; but it is surprising how hard it is sometimes for good ideas to get into people's minds. Now, however, having once entered the head of Baron Rudolph, it was amazing how happy it made him!

He was so pleased with himself that he could not understand why he had not thought it all out before; for he found it so much more agreeable to have kind intentions toward everybody than to be cross to them. At once he began to plan all sorts of ways in which he might help the peasant folk instead of hindering and oppressing them.

The old frown smoothed out from his fore-

head; and when, every day or two, some of the serving-folk brought down things from the castle, they took back more wonderful tales than ever of how the baron had changed.

"Only think!" said one of the seneschals to the kitchen folk after he had been down to the valley, "Baron Rudolph smiled and spoke kindly to me, and asked pleasantly how you were all getting along! He is even kinder than when Lady Hildegarde lived, before he turned against every one!"

"La me!" said one of the maids. "If we were to believe all the stories you folks bring back about the baron we would have to think a miracle has happened! We can't believe his crossness and hardness for all these years can change so suddenly!"

"Yes," said another, "you are surely making sport of us!"

But the seneschal declared earnestly, "No, I am telling you the truth! Just wait till he comes home and you will see for yourselves! And it hasn't been so suddenly, either; you know he has been down there in the valley for weeks and weeks, and I guess he has had time to think over his sins!"

The maids still looked incredulous; but by and by the time came when, as the seneschal had said, they were to see for themselves.

For Baron Rudolph had at last become well enough to go back to the castle, and the morning was set for his return.

He had thanked Peasant Johann and Frau Hedwig most warmly for all their kindness to him, and had seen to it that they were liberally paid for the trouble he had been to them. He had insisted on them taking this money, though they did not want to; for

after the first few weeks the baron had been so kind and pleasant to them that they had grown very fond of him and were honestly glad to do what they could for him, simply out of the goodness of their own hearts; and they really hated to have him go.

"I would never have believed," confided Frau Hedwig to Peasant Johann when they had climbed to their loft the night before Baron Rudolph was to leave, "no, I would never have believed that day the baron was brought here that I would be sorry to see him go, but I am!"

"Yes," answered Peasant Johann slowly, "he is a fine gentleman and knows how to be pleasant to us poor folks as well as harsh to us. I hope he won't go back to his old ways when he is home again!"

"Never fear!" said Frau Hedwig with em-

phasis. "He is a changed man, and it is my belief that he has a warm heart after all and will be a good master to us." And Frau Hedwig, who was keener witted than Peasant Johann, closed her lips with a wise look in her eyes. "Kaspar loves him, too," she added, "and you cannot deceive babies; they never like cross, hard-hearted people!"

XV

THE CAGE DOOR IS OPENED AT LAST

THE next morning Baron Rudolph's groom rode down the mountain leading with him the gentlest horse from the castle stables for his master to ride.

When all was ready and the good-byes were said, Kaspar, who seemed to know that

his friend the baron was going away to stay, cried so bitterly, and, toddling to him, clung so tightly to the top of one of his tall laced riding-boots, that with a smile Baron Rudolph stooped and lifted the little boy in his arms. Kissing his rosy cheek, "Kaspar," he said, "you must ask Frau Hedwig to bring you to the castle to see me, for I shall be very lonesome when I go away from here."

And the baron sighed; for the truth was, he hated to leave the kindly life in which chance had thrown him for so long, and to go back to the great lonely rooms of the castle. "But then," he thought to himself with an inward thrill of joy, "they will not be lonely any more when Conrad comes back!" Then turning to Frau Hedwig, who was secretly wiping her eyes with the corner of her apron, he handed Kaspar to

her, saying, "You must surely bring him up to see me!"

The baron next took Rosechen's hand as she stood near her mother. "Rosechen," he said, "I want you to go with me and spend the day at the castle. The groom can take you in front of him on his saddle, and I will send you home the same way."

Rosechen gasped with surprise. "Why, sir baron!" she said in confusion, twisting in her hand her little homespun apron as she looked at him with brightening eyes. Just here a loud cackling came from the near-by stable where the geese were impatient to be taken out.

"Never mind the geese," said Baron Rudolph. "They can wait till you come back."

But Rosechen was not thinking of her geese but of what Henry the page had said

about the baron having forbidden her to come to Hohenberg. Now she smiled happily and cried, "Oh, sir, I knew it wasn't true that you ordered the gate-keeper not to let me come to the castle any more!"

"Who told you that?" asked the baron sharply.

"Henry, the page, told me, sir," answered Rosechen, "but," she added simply, "I did not believe it."

Here Baron Rudolph flushed with confusion. "Never mind if I did!" he said hastily. "That was long ago. And as for Henry, he is an impudent young rascal whom I shall teach better manners!"

Here Frau Hedwig interposed; she did not know what it all meant as she knew nothing of the little girl's friendship for the old magpie, but she was much flattered by the baron's

invitation to Rosechen to go with him to the castle; so she said to her, "Child, I am sure it is very kind of Baron Rudolph to ask you to go to the castle for to-day, so do as he says and go just as you are." For while Frau Hedwig would like to have seen Rosechen wearing her little holiday dress and embroidered kerchief and apron, as she was going to Hohenberg as a guest, yet she knew it would never do to keep the lord of the castle waiting.

After the baron had been helped to mount his own horse, there was much laughter as the groom lifted Rosechen and set her in front of him on the saddle. Rosechen, who had never before been on a horse, was delighted and waved a merry good-bye to Kaspar who held up his fat little arms and cried lustily to go along.

The geese, too, cackled louder than ever

with surprise and indignation as they peered from their pen through the open door of the stable, wondering why their little mistress did not come to take them out.

"You will have to wait!" called back Rosechen gleefully. "I cannot ride on a horse every day!"

Up, up they rode, the path growing steeper and steeper, while the birds sang and the torrent plashed and gurgled till Rosechen thought the mountain had never looked so lovely. Nor had she dreamed how fine it was to be carried on the back of a stout horse instead of trudging up on her own little feet.

When they reached the crag of Hohenberg, the gate-keeper was so astonished to see Rosechen riding on the groom's horse that he barely remembered in time to make his bow and give his greetings to Baron Rudolph.

While as for Henry the page, when he hurried out to help his master dismount, he was so overcome at the sight of Rosechen, who could not help but smile mischievously at him, that he stood stock still, staring at her till the baron was obliged to say sharply, "Henry, you seem to have forgotten the duty of a page!"

At this Henry's face fell, and with another look of angry surprise toward Rosechen he hastened to attend his master.

When the latter had dismounted and the groom had lifted Rosechen to the ground, Baron Rudolph, taking her hand, said in a low voice, "Rosechen, the special reason I wanted you to come with me to-day is because I have decided there are to be no more prisoner magpies" (out of respect to Rosechen he did not use the time-honored word

"wicked") "at Castle Hohenberg, and I want you to open the cage door."

Rosechen again gasped with surprise. She did not know what to say, so she only tightened her clasp of the baron's hand as she looked up at him with eyes full of delight.

Together they crossed the courtyard to the old gray tower, and Rosechen, in her eagerness slipping her hand from Baron Rudolph's, ran up the steps from which she could always see the magpie.

But her smiles quickly faded and a great sob rose in her throat as she looked within the cage; for the poor old captive lay dead upon its floor.

Rosechen stood quite still for a moment, and then, her blue eyes filled with tears, she slowly turned and came silently down the stair; while Baron Rudolph, who, being

taller than she, had seen what had happened, quietly lifted the cage from the dragon hook and set it on the paving stones at the foot of the tower.

Here Rosechen knelt down and opening the door to the freedom which had come too late, put in her little hand and softly smoothed the lusterless feathers of the forlorn and forsaken bird. As she stroked his quiet wings that would never again flutter to greet his one little friend, she murmured gently, "Poor magpie, poor magpie!" Then looking up at Baron Rudolph who was standing watching her, she said, "Henry told me, sir, that my petting him and giving him little things to eat brought bad luck and made you fall off of your horse! But I don't believe it!" she added passionately.

Baron Rudolph was silent; and presently,

"Do *you* believe it, sir?" she faltered, looking earnestly at him.

At this Baron Rudolph, who was absorbed in his own thoughts, roused himself. "Henry is certainly a good-for-nothing fellow," he said, "who must be made to mind his own affairs! And," he added, "your petting the magpie could not possibly have brought bad luck, because my fall from Sigrid that day in the forest was the best thing that ever happened to me."

Of course Rosechen did not know all the new ideas and thoughts about things that had come to Baron Rudolph as he lay in the high-posted bed all those weeks at her home; so she now stared at him in bewilderment.

"Never mind, child," said he, smiling at her blank look. "You will understand me some time. I only meant that if I had not

been hurt that day so that I had to stay so long in your home you would never have told me that the magpie was not wicked, and I would have gone on thinking he was and probably shutting up more when he died instead of doing the much better way I have thought of to make amends for Jan's death."

Rosechen still looked bewildered; but Baron Rudolph was gazing at the dead magpie with a look of real pity, so she knew that he did not believe what Henry had told her; and that relieved her mind, for it had worried her a little, and especially since she had grown so fond of the baron she did not want to think she had had anything to do with injuring him.

Baron Rudolph presently called Wilhelm, Rosechen's boy friend, from the kitchen tower and bade him dig a little grave in the green

grass of the castle enclosure. And when Wilhelm had carefully smoothed the turf above the magpie, Rosechen plucked a sprig of mignonette from a flower bed near by and laid it at his head.

A year or two later, one springtime a gust of wind carried off the last fragment of the deserted nest which had so long clung to the top of the tall pine tree on the lower slope of the mountain. It was the nest the magpie had built in his youth; and as at last the pine-tree felt itself freed from the burden which had annoyed it for so long, it rustled all its green branches and murmured softly to itself, "Well, at last I am rid of that old nest which has been so torn and weather-beaten for so many years that it quite spoiled my beauty.

"It was a very handsome nest, though, when it was new, and I cannot but feel sorry for the unfortunate magpie who built it. I heard from some of the birds resting on my boughs that he had died in the iron cage in which he was kept so long at the Castle of Hohenberg. I am glad to know, however, that it is done away with now. Only the other day I overheard some magpies chattering about how relieved they all are that they need no longer fear being trapped and imprisoned in it; for they say the cage is gone from the dragon hook and that no one has seen it since the day my old magpie died!

"But the strangest thing of all is that they declare Baron Rudolph is a changed man, not cross and harsh to the peasant people, but so good and kind that now they call him 'Baron Rudolph the Good!' And they say

that he and his son Conrad and his pretty young wife, who live with the baron, are especially kind to a little goose-girl named Rosechen and to her family.

"Heigho! I wonder what made him change so, and why he decided to have no more magpies in the cage? It was truly a foolish old custom, and I am sorry my magpie was obliged to pass so forlorn a life. But perhaps after all it was not in vain, seeing that the cage no longer hangs from the castle tower and that all the peasant folk of the valley are so happy and contented."