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**A Winter Nosegay**

**By**

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**A WINTER NOSEGAY.**

**Being Tales for Children at Christmastide.**

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## **THE MAN IN THE MOON.**

ONCE upon a time, long before people were able to learn what they wanted to know from printed books, long before children had pretty pictures to tell them tales, there lived an old student with his pupil. Together they spent all the day in poring over musty old books and papers, trying to find out why the sun was hot; and in the night-time they might always be seen gazing at the sky, counting how many stars there were there. They were very curious folk, and wanted to know the reasons for all sorts of out-of-the-way things that everybody else was content to know the mere facts of, such as why birds have two wings and not three, why crocodiles have no fins, seeing that they can swim in the water, and many other matters that would not interest sensible beings. They always had at their side a young owl, and a serpent, toothless and blind with age; for they thought that youthful observation and aged craftiness were most suitable companions for them in their labours. If at any time old Fusticus, for so the old student was named, got dispirited in his work, or felt inclined to give it up as a hopeless task, he had but to turn round in his chair, and there behind him sat his owl, who seemed to say, as he cocked his head on one side, "Never despair, success only comes after long perseverance!" Or if he stuck fast at any point, and could make no progress, one glance at the old serpent made him think, "Snakes wait whole days and nights on watch for their prey; why should I give in?" And, strange to say, with a little more attention and care, he always did get over his smaller difficulties.

But at last old Fusticus got weary of his long studies, as he seemed never to find an answer to any one of the questions he had set himself; and he was about to give them up altogether, when he came across a curious passage in the old tome in which he was reading. For a long time he could not make it out at all, but after deep thought and consultation with his pupil, he discovered that it was a spell, by which he could call up the Spirit of Darkness, whom he could compel to grant him any three wishes that he might demand. The only condition was that he should give to the Spirit of Darkness whatever he should ask of him.

Old Fusticus thought and thought a long time over this discovery, and at last decided to make use of it. So one day he repeated the charm he had learnt from the book, and when he had finished the last word, to his amazement, for he did not quite believe it was all true, there stood before him the Spirit of Darkness! He was not at all like what he had imagined he would have been; for he had not a hideous face, nor a tail, but was dressed in the costume of a court gentleman, with a sword at his side and a cocked hat in his hand. He had, too, a pigtail, ruffles and all complete!

"Sire," he said to Fusticus, "what is your will? You have summoned me to you by a power not your own--you know the condition on which you use that power. What is your wish?"

"My wish you shall soon learn, or rather my three wishes. But what is it that you demand in return?"

"All that I ask is now--nothing! All that I want is your first-born babe!"

"I have no child--I am an old man without a wife. If I had a child, you should have him." Fusticus did not think what he was saying, you see; but he felt quite safe in offering a thing that did not exist.

"'Tis a bargain!" cried the wicked Spirit at once and with glee. "Here is a written compact! Sign!" and Fusticus with a laugh put his name to the paper, for he thought: "Ah, my fine fellow! you have over-reached yourself this time! In trying to get too much, you have got nothing at all!" and he laughed again.

"Your wishes?" asked the Spirit of Darkness, putting the signed document into his coat-tail pocket.

"Well!" said Fusticus, "first of all I will have---- dear me! what shall I have? Now I come to think of it, I don't know that I want anything at all! Let me see, I have clothes, a house, my owl and my old serpent, I have a pupil, my books, my--oh! I know! I have not got a horse to ride upon! But to wish for only a horse! Spirit, let me have a Cock large enough for me to ride upon!"

And forthwith there appeared a monstrous cock, so large that Fusticus could easily sit upon its back. And this he at once did. "Shan't I look grand now!" thought Fusticus, "as I ride through the village. All eyes will be upon me!" Just at that moment the cock gave a loud crow, and began to strut onwards, and away they went to the village. And as the last sound of the cock's crow died away, the Spirit of Darkness vanished.

The cock made his way straight to the village, and through the chief street. Everybody turned to look at Fusticus and his remarkable mode of travelling, but his friends did not, as he had expected, seem very much struck with its grandeur. "Poor old Fusticus has gone quite mad," they said to each other; "that comes of too much reading!" and they would not return the polite bows that Fusticus showered upon them. And so silly old Fusticus soon came to repent his first wish. "Oh! that I had not been so foolish!" cried Fusticus,

and as soon as he got out of the village, he dismounted from his cock, and again called upon the Spirit of Darkness.

"And so you already want something more? You mortals are never contented," said the latter. "Everybody laughs at my steed," answered Fusticus; "I cannot ride through the streets without looking absurd! Give me a golden carriage, drawn by four real horses this time, with as many servants as attend a duke;" and the next moment up drove the most magnificent carriage he had ever beheld, with four prancing white horses, and a footman and two postilions. Behind it rode two lords, to guard it. "Now I shall indeed be happy! Now my friends can no longer laugh!" thought Fusticus, and the very next day he took his first drive.

When his friends saw that Fusticus had come into such luck, and had such a grand carriage of his own, they all thought "Dear me! some rich relation of Fusticus must have died, and left him all this. I hope he did not see me laugh when he passed me yesterday on that curious cock of his!" But Fusticus was too pleased to be unfriendly with anybody, when he saw what marked attention his grand equipage brought him. He sat smiling inside his carriage and had a kind word for all, even for the poor old woman he saw the rough villagers jeering at and abusing. He even called to them to stop breaking the pitchers and pots that she was trying to sell in the market-place, the only grudge that they had against her being that she had a rather more hooked nose than their own!

Fusticus now lived for some time quite happy. Everybody thought a great deal of him, because of his fine carriage, in which he used to take daily drives. All the young unmarried ladies of the village tormented him that he was still a bachelor, saying that his carriage must have been made for two, as there were two seats in it. And this seemed such a forcible argument to Fusticus, that he soon took one of the ladies as a wife. In course of time a little baby was born to them. Scarcely was the child a week old, when one morning, just as Fusticus was nursing his little pet, in through the window sprang the Spirit of Darkness! Drawing the written compact from his pocket, he said, "In accordance with this, give me up your child, your first-born! But you have one wish still left. What may it be?" Fusticus was struck dumb; he could not recover himself for a long time, for in his happiness he had quite forgotten his promise, quite forgotten his third wish, and all about the Spirit of Darkness!

"I cannot yield my child, my young and innocent darling!" he cried. "Anything else you may take--my life, my carriage, anything, but leave me my child!"

"The child! the child! and nothing else!" shrieked the demon, and then, regaining himself, with a smile added: "And your last wish?"

"If I lose my boy," answered Fusticus, "my joy on this earth is for ever gone. If you take my child, then, oh Spirit of Darkness and Deceit! then, may I for all eternity pass my life in the Moon!" "Granted too is your third----" "But I have not finished yet," broke in Fusticus, "and may my child for ever remain with me there!"

And there you may see them both to this day, but the child was changed into a spider. And every now and then the good little spider lets himself down by his thread to the earth and takes his father back all the news of the day.

But if you, Reader, had three wishes granted to you, I hope you would choose them better and more wisely than did old Fusticus!