

200 The Golden Key

In the winter time, when deep snow lay on the ground, a poor boy was forced to go out on a sledge to fetch wood. When he had gathered it together, and packed it, he wished, as he was so frozen with cold, not to go home at once, but to light a fire and warm himself a little. So he scraped away the snow, and as he was thus clearing the ground, he found a tiny, gold key. Hereupon he thought that where the key was, the lock must be also, and dug in the ground and found an iron chest. "If the key does but fit it!" thought he; "no doubt there are precious things in that little box." He searched, but no keyhole was there. At last he discovered one, but so small that it was hardly visible. He tried it, and the key fitted it exactly. Then he turned it once round, and now we must wait until he has quite unlocked it and opened the lid, and then we shall learn what wonderful things were lying in that box.

Children's Legends

Legend 1 St. Joseph in the Forest

There was once on a time a mother who had three daughters, the eldest of whom was rude and wicked, the second much better, although she had her faults, but the youngest was a pious, good child. The mother was, however, so strange, that it was just the eldest daughter whom she most loved, and she could not bear the youngest. On this account, she often sent the poor girl out into the great forest in order to get rid of her, for she thought she would lose herself and never come back again. But the guardian-angel which every good child has, did not forsake her, but always brought her into the right path again. Once, however, the guardian-angel behaved as if he were not there, and the child could not find her way out of the forest again. She walked on constantly until evening came, and then she saw a tiny light burning in the distance, ran up to it at once, and came to a little hut. She knocked, the door opened, and she came to a second door, where she knocked again. An old man, who had a snow-white beard and looked venerable, opened it for her; and he was no other than St. Joseph. He said quite kindly, "Come, dear child, seat thyself on my little chair by the fire, and warm thyself; I will fetch thee clear water if thou art thirsty; but here in the forest, I have nothing for thee to eat but a couple of little roots, which thou must first scrape and boil."

St. Joseph gave her the roots. The girl scraped them clean, then she brought a piece of pancake and the bread that her mother had given

her to take with her; mixed all together in a pan, and cooked herself a thick soup. When it was ready, St. Joseph said, "I am so hungry; give me some of thy food." The child was quite willing, and gave him more than she kept for herself, but God's blessing was with her, so that she was satisfied. When they had eaten, St. Joseph said, "Now we will go to bed; I have, however, only one bed, lay thyself in it. I will lie on the ground on the straw." "No," answered she, "stay in your own bed, the straw is soft enough for me." St. Joseph, however, took the child in his arms, and carried her into the little bed, and there she said her prayers, and fell asleep. Next morning when she awoke, she wanted to say good morning to St. Joseph, but she did not see him. Then she got up and looked for him, but could not find him anywhere; at last she perceived, behind the door, a bag with money so heavy that she could just carry it, and on it was written that it was for the child who had slept there that night. On this she took the bag, bounded away with it, and got safely to her mother, and as she gave her mother all the money, she could not help being satisfied with her.

The next day, the second child also took a fancy to go into the forest. Her mother gave her a much larger piece of pancake and bread. It happened with her just as with the first child. In the evening she came to St. Joseph's little hut, who gave her roots for a thick soup. When it was ready, he likewise said to her, "I am so hungry, give me some of thy food." Then the child said, "You may have your share." Afterwards, when St. Joseph offered her his bed and wanted to lie on the straw, she replied, "No, lie down in the bed, there is plenty of room for both of us." St. Joseph took her in his arms and put her in the bed, and laid

himself on the straw.

In the morning when the child awoke and looked for St. Joseph, he had vanished, but behind the door she found a little sack of money that was about as long as a hand, and on it was written that it was for the child who had slept there last night. So she took the little bag and ran home with it, and took it to her mother, but she secretly kept two pieces for herself.

The eldest daughter had by this time grown curious, and the next morning also insisted on going out into the forest. Her mother gave her pancakes with her---as many as she wanted, and bread and cheese as well. In the evening she found St. Joseph in his little hut, just as the two others had found him. When the soup was ready and St. Joseph said, "I am so hungry, give me some of thy food," the girl answered, "Wait until I am satisfied; then if there is anything left thou shalt have it." She ate, however, nearly the whole of it, and St. Joseph had to scrape the dish. Afterwards, the good old man offered her his bed, and wanted to lie on the straw. She took it without making any opposition, laid herself down in the little bed, and left the hard straw to the white-haired man. Next morning when she awoke, St. Joseph was not to be found, but she did not trouble herself about that. She looked behind the door for a money-bag. She fancied something was lying on the ground, but as she could not very well distinguish what it was, she stooped down, and examined it closely, but it remained hanging to her nose, and when she got up again, she saw, to her horror, that it was a second nose, which was hanging fast to her own. Then she began to scream and howl,

but that did no good; she was forced to see it always on her nose, for it stretched out so far. Then she ran out and screamed without stopping till she met St. Joseph, at whose feet she fell and begged until, out of pity, he took the nose off her again, and even gave her two farthings. When she got home, her mother was standing before the door, and asked, "What hast thou had given to thee?" Then she lied and said, "A great bag of money, but I have lost it on the way." "Lost it!" cried the mother, "oh, but we will soon find it again," and took her by the hand, and wanted to seek it with her. At first she began to cry, and did not wish to go, but at last she went. On the way, however, so many lizards and snakes broke loose on both of them, that they did not know how to save themselves. At last they stung the wicked child to death, and they stung the mother in the foot, because she had not brought her up better.

Legend 2 The Twelve Apostles

Three hundred years before the birth of the Lord Christ, there lived a mother who had twelve sons, but was so poor and needy that she no longer knew how she was to keep them alive at all. She prayed to God daily that he would grant that all her sons might be on the earth with the Redeemer who was promised. When her necessity became still greater she sent one of them after the other out into the world to seek bread for her. The eldest was called Peter, and he went out and had already walked a long way, a whole day's journey, when he came into a great forest. He sought for a way out, but could find none, and went farther and farther astray, and at the same time felt such great hunger that he could scarcely stand. At length he became so weak that he was forced to lie down, and he believed death to be at hand. Suddenly there stood beside him a small boy who shone with brightness, and was as beautiful and kind as an angel. The child smote his little hands together, until Peter was forced to look up and saw him. Then the child said, "Why art thou sitting there in such trouble?" "Alas!" answered Peter, "I am going about the world seeking bread, that I may yet see the dear Saviour who is promised, that is my greatest desire." The child said, "Come with me, and thy wish shall be fulfilled." He took poor Peter by the hand, and led him between some cliffs to a great cavern. When they entered it, everything was shining with gold, silver, and crystal, and in the midst of it twelve cradles were standing side by side. Then said the little angel, "Lie down in the first, and sleep a while, I will rock thee." Peter did so, and the angel sang to him and rocked him until he was asleep. And when he was asleep, the second brother came also, guided

thither by his guardian angel, and he was rocked to sleep like the first, and thus came the others, one after the other, until all twelve lay there sleeping in the golden cradles. They slept, however, three hundred years, until the night when the Saviour of the world was born. Then they awoke, and were with him on earth, and were called the twelve apostles.

Legend 3 The Rose

There was once a poor woman who had two children. The youngest had to go every day into the forest to fetch wood. Once when she had gone a long way to seek it, a little child, who was quite strong, came and helped her industriously to pick up the wood and carry it home, and then before a moment had passed the strange child disappeared. The child told her mother this, but at first she would not believe it. At length she brought a rose home, and told her mother that the beautiful child had given her this rose, and had told her that when it was in full bloom, he would return. The mother put the rose in water. One morning her child could not get out of bed, the mother went to the bed and found her dead, but she lay looking very happy. On the same morning, the rose was in full bloom.

Legend 4 Poverty and Humility Lead to Heaven

There was once a King's son who went out into the world, and he was full of thought and sad. He looked at the sky, which was so beautifully pure and blue, then he sighed, and said, "How well must all be with one up there in heaven!" Then he saw a poor gray-haired man who was coming along the road towards him, and he spoke to him, and asked, "How can I get to heaven?" The man answered, "By poverty and humility. Put on my ragged clothes, wander about the world for seven years, and get to know what misery is, take no money, but if thou art hungry ask compassionate hearts for a bit of bread; in this way thou wilt reach heaven."

Then the King's son took off his magnificent coat, and wore in its place the beggar's garment, went out into the wide world, and suffered great misery. He took nothing but a little food, said nothing, but prayed to the Lord to take him into his heaven. When the seven years were over, he returned to his father's palace, but no one recognized him. He said to the servants, "Go and tell my parents that I have come back again." But the servants did not believe it, and laughed and left him standing there. Then said he, "Go and tell it to my brothers that they may come down, for I should so like to see them again." The servants would not do that either, but at last one of them went, and told it to the King's children, but these did not believe it, and did not trouble themselves about it. Then he wrote a letter to his mother, and described to her all his misery, but he did not say that he was her son. So, out of pity, the Queen had a place under the stairs assigned to him, and food taken to him daily by two servants. But one of them was ill-natured and said,

"Why should the beggar have the good food?" and kept it for himself, or gave it to the dogs, and took the weak, wasted-away beggar nothing but water; the other, however, was honest, and took the beggar what was sent to him. It was little, but he could live on it for a while, and all the time he was quite patient, but he grew continually weaker. As, however, his illness increased, he desired to receive the last sacrament. When the host was being elevated down below, all the bells in the town and neighbourhood began to ring. After mass the priest went to the poor man under the stairs, and there he lay dead. In one hand he had a rose, in the other a lily, and beside him was a paper in which was written his history.

When he was buried, a rose grew on one side of his grave, and a lily on the other.

Legend 5 God's Food

There were once upon a time two sisters, one of whom had no children and was rich, and the other had five and was a widow, and so poor that she no longer had food enough to satisfy herself and her children. In her need, therefore, she went to her sister, and said, "My children and I are suffering the greatest hunger; thou art rich, give me a mouthful of bread." The very rich sister was as hard as a stone, and said, "I myself have nothing in the house," and drove away the poor creature with harsh words. After some time the husband of the rich sister came home, and was just going to cut himself a piece of bread, but when he made the first cut into the loaf, out flowed red blood. When the woman saw that she was terrified and told him what had occurred. He hurried away to help the widow and her children, but when he entered her room, he found her praying. She had her two youngest children in her arms, and the three eldest were lying dead. He offered her food, but she answered, "For earthly food have we no longer any desire. God has already satisfied the hunger of three of us, and he will hearken to our supplications likewise." Scarcely had she uttered these words than the two little ones drew their last breath, whereupon her heart broke, and she sank down dead.

Legend 6 The Three Green Twigs

There was once on a time a hermit who lived in a forest at the foot of a mountain, and passed his time in prayer and good works, and every evening he carried, to the glory of God, two pails of water up the mountain. Many a beast drank of it, and many a plant was refreshed by it, for on the heights above, a strong wind blew continually, which dried the air and the ground, and the wild birds which dread mankind wheel about there, and with their sharp eyes search for a drink. And because the hermit was so pious, an angel of God, visible to his eyes, went up with him, counted his steps, and when the work was completed, brought him his food, even as the prophet of old was by God's command fed by the raven. When the hermit in his piety had already reached a great age, it happened that he once saw from afar a poor sinner being taken to the gallows. He said carelessly to himself, "There, that one is getting his deserts!" In the evening, when he was carrying the water up the mountain, the angel who usually accompanied him did not appear, and also brought him no food. Then he was terrified, and searched his heart, and tried to think how he could have sinned, as God was so angry, but he did not discover it. Then he neither ate nor drank, threw himself down on the ground, and prayed day and night. And as he was one day thus bitterly weeping in the forest, he heard a little bird singing beautifully and delightfully, and then he was still more troubled and said, "How joyously thou singest, the Lord is not angry with thee. Ah, if thou couldst but tell me how I can have offended him, that I might do penance, and then my heart also would be glad again." Then the bird began to speak and said, "Thou hast done injustice, in that thou hast

condemned a poor sinner who was being led to the gallows, and for that the Lord is angry with thee. He alone sits in judgement. However, if thou wilt do penance and repent thy sins, he will forgive thee." Then the angel stood beside him with a dry branch in his hand and said, "Thou shalt carry this dry branch until three green twigs sprout out of it, but at night when thou wilt sleep, thou shalt lay it under thy head. Thou shalt beg thy bread from door to door, and not tarry more than one night in the same house. That is the penance which the Lord lays on thee."

Then the hermit took the piece of wood, and went back into the world, which he had not seen for so long. He ate and drank nothing but what was given him at the doors; many petitions were, however, not listened to, and many doors remained shut to him, so that he often did not get a crumb of bread.

Once when he had gone from door to door from morning till night, and no one had given him anything, and no one would shelter him for the night, he went forth into a forest, and at last found a cave which someone had made, and an old woman was sitting in it. Then said he, "Good woman, keep me with you in your house for this night;" but she said, "No, I dare not, even if I wished, I have three sons who are wicked and wild, if they come home from their robbing expedition, and find you, they would kill us both." The hermit said, "Let me stay, they will do no injury either to you or to me." and the woman was compassionate, and let herself be persuaded. Then the man lay down beneath the stairs, and put the bit of wood under his head. When the old woman saw him do that, she asked the reason of it, on which he told her that he carried the bit of wood about

with him for a penance, and used it at night for a pillow, and that he had offended the Lord, because, when he had seen a poor sinner on the way to the gallows, he had said he was getting his deserts. Then the woman began to weep and cried, "If the Lord thus punishes one single word, how will it fare with my sons when they appear before him in judgment?"

At midnight the robbers came home and blustered and stormed. They made a fire, and when it had lighted up the cave and they saw a man lying under the stairs, they fell in a rage and cried to their mother, "Who is the man? Have we not forbidden any one whatsoever to be taken in?" Then said the mother, "Let him alone, it is a poor sinner who is expiating his crime." The robbers asked, "What has he done?" "Old man," cried they, "tell us thy sins." The old man raised himself and told them how he, by one single word, had so sinned that God was angry with him, and how he was now expiating this crime. The robbers were so powerfully touched in their hearts by this story, that they were shocked with their life up to this time, reflected, and began with hearty repentance to do penance for it. The hermit, after he had converted the three sinners, lay down to sleep again under the stairs. In the morning, however, they found him dead, and out of the dry wood on which his head lay, three green twigs had grown up on high. Thus the Lord had once more received him into his favour.

Legend 7 Our Lady's Little Glass

Once upon a time a waggoner's cart which was heavily laden with wine had stuck so fast that in spite of all that he could do, he could not get it to move again. Then it chanced that Our Lady just happened to come by that way, and when she perceived the poor man's distress, she said to him, "I am tired and thirsty, give me a glass of wine, and I will set thy cart free for thee." "Willingly," answered the waggoner, "but I have no glass in which I can give thee the wine." Then Our Lady plucked a little white flower with red stripes, called field bindweed, which looks very like a glass, and gave it to the waggoner. He filled it with wine, and then Our Lady drank it, and in the self-same instant the cart was set free, and the waggoner could drive onwards. The little flower is still always called Our Lady's Little Glass.

Legend 8 The Aged Mother

In a large town there was an old woman who sat in the evening alone in her room thinking how she had lost first her husband, then both her children, then one by one all her relations, and at length, that very day, her last friend, and now she was quite alone and desolate. She was very sad at heart, and heaviest of all her losses to her was that of her sons; and in her pain she blamed God for it. She was still sitting lost in thought, when all at once she heard the bells ringing for early prayer. She was surprised that she had thus in her sorrow watched through the whole night, and lighted her lantern and went to church. It was already lighted up when she arrived, but not as it usually was with wax candles, but with a dim light. It was also crowded already with people, and all the seats were filled; and when the old woman got to her usual place it also was not empty, but the whole bench was entirely full. And when she looked at the people, they were none other than her dead relations who were sitting there in their old-fashioned garments, but with pale faces. They neither spoke nor sang; but a soft humming and whispering was heard all over the church. Then an aunt of hers stood up, stepped forward, and said to the poor old woman, "Look there beside the altar, and thou wilt see thy sons." The old woman looked there, and saw her two children, one hanging on the gallows, the other bound to the wheel. Then said the aunt, "Behold, so would it have been with them if they had lived, and if the good God had not taken them to himself when they were innocent children." The old woman went trembling home, and on her knees thanked God for having dealt with her more kindly than she had been able to understand, and on the third day she lay down and died.

Legend 9 The Heavenly Wedding

A poor peasant-boy one day heard the priest say in church that whosoever desired to enter into the kingdom of heaven must always go straight onward. So he set out, and walked continually straight onwards over hill and valley without ever turning aside. At length his way led him into a great town, and into the midst of a church, where just at that time God's service was being performed. Now when he beheld all the magnificence of this, he thought he had reached heaven, sat down, and rejoiced with his whole heart. When the service was over, and the clerk bade him go out, he replied, "No, I will not go out again, I am glad to be in heaven at last." So the clerk went to the priest, and told him that there was a child in the church who would not go out again, because he believed he was in heaven. The priest said, "If he believes that, we will leave him inside." So he went to him, and asked if he had any inclination to work. "Yes," the little fellow replied, "I am accustomed to work, but I will not go out of heaven again." So he stayed in the church, and when he saw how the people came and knelt and prayed to Our Lady with the blessed child Jesus which was carved in wood, he thought "that is the good God," and said, "Dear God, how thin you are! The people must certainly let you starve; but every day I will give you half my dinner." From this time forth, he every day took half his dinner to the image, and the image began to enjoy the food. When a few weeks had gone by, people remarked that the image was growing larger and stout and strong, and wondered much. The priest also could not understand it, but stayed in the church, and followed the little boy about, and then he saw how he shared his food with the Virgin Mary, and how she accepted it.

After some time the boy became ill, and for eight days could not leave his bed; but as soon as he could get up again, the first thing he did was to take his food to Our Lady. The priest followed him, and heard him say, "Dear God, do not take it amiss that I have not brought you anything for such a long time, for I have been ill and could not get up." Then the image answered him and said, "I have seen thy good-will, and that is enough for me. Next Sunday thou shalt go with me to the wedding." The boy rejoiced at this, and repeated it to the priest, who begged him to go and ask the image if he, too, might be permitted to go. "No," answered the image, "thou alone." The priest wished to prepare him first, and give him the holy communion and the child was willing, and next Sunday, when the host came to him, he fell down and died, and was at the eternal wedding.

Legend 10 The Hazel-Branch

One afternoon the Christ-child had laid himself in his cradle-bed and had fallen asleep. Then his mother came to him, looked at him full of gladness, and said, "Hast thou laid thyself down to sleep, my child? Sleep sweetly, and in the meantime I will go into the wood, and fetch thee a handful of strawberries, for I know that thou wilt be pleased with them when thou awakest." In the wood outside, she found a spot with the most beautiful strawberries; but as she was stooping down to gather one, an adder sprang up out of the grass. She was alarmed, left the strawberries where they were, and hastened away. The adder darted after her; but Our Lady, as you can readily understand, knew what it was best to do. She hid herself behind a hazel-bush, and stood there until the adder had crept away again. Then she gathered the strawberries, and as she set out on her way home she said, "As the hazel-bush has been my protection this time, it shall in future protect others also." Therefore, from the most remote times, a green hazel-branch has been the safest protection against adders, snakes, and everything else which creeps on the earth.