

HOW THE CRICKETS BROUGHT GOOD FORTUNE

My friend Jacques went into a baker's shop one day to buy a little cake which he had fancied in passing. He intended it for a child whose appetite was gone, and who could be coaxed to eat only by amusing him. He thought that such a pretty loaf might tempt even the sick. While he waited for his change, a little boy six or eight years old, in poor but perfectly clean clothes, entered the baker's shop.

"Ma'am," said he to the baker's wife, "Mother sent me for a loaf of bread." The woman took from the shelf a four-pound loaf, the best one she could find, and put it into the arms of the little boy.

My friend Jacques then first observed the thin and thoughtful face of the little fellow. It contrasted strongly with the round, open countenance of the large loaf, of which he was taking the greatest care.

"Have you any money?" said the baker's wife.

The little boy's eyes grew sad.

"No, ma'am," said he, hugging the loaf closer to his thin blouse; "but mother told me to say that she would come and speak to you about it to-morrow."

"Run along," said the good woman; "carry your bread home, child."

"Thank you, ma'am," said the poor little fellow.

My friend Jacques came forward for his money. He had put his purchase into his pocket, and was about to go, when he found the child with the big loaf, whom he had supposed to be half-way home, standing stock-still behind him.

"What are you doing there?" said the baker's wife to the child, whom she also had thought to be fairly off. "Don't you like the bread?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am!" said the child.

"Well, then, carry it to your mother, my little friend. If you wait any longer, she will think you are playing by the way, and you will get a scolding." The child did not seem to hear. Something else absorbed his attention. The baker's wife went up to him and gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder. "What are you thinking about?" said she.

"Ma'am," said the little boy, "what is that that sings?"

"There is no singing," said she.

"Yes!" cried the little fellow. "Hear it! Queek, queek, queek, queek!"

My friend and the woman both listened, but they could hear nothing, unless it was the song of the crickets, frequent guests in bakers houses.

"It is a little bird," said the dear little fellow; "or perhaps the bread sings when it bakes, as apples do?"

"No, indeed, little goosey!" said the baker's wife; "those are crickets. They sing in the bake-house because we are lighting the oven, and they like to see the fire."

"Crickets!" said the child; "are they really crickets?"

"Yes, to be sure," said she, good-humouredly. The child's face lighted up.

"Ma'am," said he, blushing at the boldness of his request, "I would like it very much if you would give me a cricket."

"A cricket," said the baker's wife, smiling; "what in the world would you do with a cricket, my little friend? I would gladly give you all there are in the house, to get rid of them, they run about so."

"O, ma'am, give me one, only one, if you please!" said the child, clasping his little thin hands under the big loaf. "They say that crickets bring good luck into houses; and perhaps if we had one at home, mother, who has so much trouble, wouldn't cry any more."

"Why does your poor mamma cry?" said my friend, who could no longer help joining in the conversation.

"On account of her bills, sir," said the little fellow. "Father is dead, and mother works very hard, but she cannot pay them all."

My friend took the child, and with him the large loaf, into his arms, and I really believe he kissed them both. Meanwhile the baker's wife, who did not dare to touch a cricket herself, had gone into the bake-house. She made her husband catch four, and put them into a box with holes in the cover, so that they might breathe. She gave the box to the child, who went away perfectly happy.

When he had gone, the baker's wife and my friend gave each other a good squeeze of the hand. "Poor little fellow!" said they both together. Then she took down her account-book, and, finding the page where the mother's charges were written, made a great dash all down the page, and then wrote at the bottom, "Paid."

Meanwhile my friend, to lose no time, had put up in paper all the money in his pockets, where fortunately he had quite a sum that day, and had begged the good wife to send it at once to the mother of the little cricket-boy, with her bill receipted, and a note, in which he told her that she had a son who would one day be her pride and joy.

They gave it to a baker's boy with long legs, and told him to make haste. The child, with his big loaf, his four crickets, and his little short legs, could not run very fast, so that when he reached home, he found his mother, for the first time in many weeks, with her eyes raised from her work, and a smile of peace and happiness upon her lips.

The boy believed that it was the arrival of his four little black things which had worked this miracle, and I do not think he was mistaken. Without the crickets, and his good little heart, would this happy change have taken place in his mother's fortunes?

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