

MAX AND PAX

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Max and Pax by Annie Keary

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ANNIE KEARY

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"The champion! the champion!"

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AND
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B O S T O N
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MAX AND PAX.

THE castle stood at the top of the hill; the cottage stood at the bottom of the hill; between them there was a thick wood.

Every day the two little boys who lived in the cottage looked over the tree-tops towards the crimson flag that waved on the castle turrets; every day they sighed, for, "You must not go yet," said the old woman who lived with them in the cottage. "It is an enchanted wood, where no one can walk safely, except on the night before the king's birthday."

"When will the king's birthday be?" said the two boys; but the old woman shook her head, and was always very busy when they asked her this question.

At other times she would talk to the boys about the castle, and tell them how a wicked fairy had enchanted the king's children, who lived there, and turned them into beasts; and how every year, on the morning of his birthday, the king stood on the castle roof, and looked towards the wood, in the hope of seeing the champion come through it, who was to restore his children; and how for many years he had turned sorrowfully away, for the champion never came.

"What will the champion be like? and what will he do?" asked the boys.

"He will look like a king," said the old woman; "he will have shoes on his feet that can never wear out, and a priceless robe over his shoulders; he will have a crystal cup in his hand, and he will take water in it from the fountain that rises up in the king's pleasure-gardens. Since the wicked fairies have had power, the water in the fountain has been blood-red, but when the champion comes it will turn white again. With this he will sprinkle the king's children, and they will be restored to their former shape. Then the king will put a gold chain round the champion's neck, and make him his prime minister, and all the courtiers will do him homage."

"I should like to be a prime minister," said Max.

"And I to restore the king's children," said Pax, his younger brother.

One day a raven flew past the cottage and struck against the window of the room in which Max slept. The old woman threw open the window and looked out; the two boys heard her muttering to herself; then she drew in her head again, and shut the window. Afterward they heard her sigh very deeply as she went about her work.

The next day a sparrow-hawk flew past and tapped the window with his beak. The old woman looked out three times; then she drew her stool near the fire, and sat still all the rest of the day without speaking. The

third day an eagle came and perched on the window-ledge. Then the old woman jumped up, and went to her meal-tub, and began in great haste to make a cake of white bread. When she had baked it she went out towards the wood, and did not return till evening.

Max and Pax were standing at the garden-gate when she came up to it. The setting sun stood directly over the castle, and all the trees of the forest were covered with gold; they bowed their heads and waved their branches, and it seemed to Max as if a whole army of men in golden armor nodded and beckoned to him.

"Now," he said, "you shall tell me on what day is the king's birthday, for I see the path that leads through the forest to the castle quite plainly."

The old woman looked a long time at the forest, and then she said, "To-morrow will be the king's birthday; and to-night you, Max, must pass through the enchanted wood."

"Good news! Good news!" cried Max; but Pax looked grave, and took hold of his brother's hand.

"Let us go together," he said.

"That you cannot do," answered the old woman. "Max must go alone; and it will be best for him to set off directly: the sun is setting, and he will have a long journey to go before it rises to-morrow."

"But where are my shoes," said Max, "and the fine clothes I am to wear when I go to the castle?"

"I cannot give you these," said the old woman; "you must seek them in the wood. I have, however, made you a cake, which will refresh you on your journey."

Max took the cake in great haste, and put it in his pocket; then, without waiting to wish any one good-by, he set off running down the pathway which led from the cottage to the borders of the wood.

Pax leant over the cottage-gate and sent farewells and kisses after his brother. The kisses spread their little gauzy wings and flew swiftly after him; they would have rested on his brow and lips, and kept off the cold night air; but Max was running so quickly that he puffed them all away, and they were obliged to fly back again, and nestle in Pax's bosom.

THE SUPPER IN THE WOOD.

The sun had not set when Max reached the outskirts of the forest. Its level rays shone directly into his eyes, and dazzled them so that he could not see anything distinctly. Now it seemed as if all the trees came dancing out of their places to meet him; now as if from the highest boughs strange faces bent down, and looked curiously into his eyes. As he entered the wood he thought that a white hand was stretched out from a thick oak-tree and rested on his shoulder. He turned round; it was only a straggling branch of a wild rose-



"The dog crossed his fore-paws on his breast, and looked steadily in Max's face."