

The Boy Who Wanted More

Cheese

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Dutch

Intermediate

11 min read

Klaas Van Bommel was a Dutch boy, twelve years old, who lived where cows were plentiful. He was over five feet high, weighed a hundred pounds, and had rosy cheeks. His appetite was always good and his mother declared his stomach had no bottom. His hair was of a color half-way between a carrot and a sweet potato. It was as thick as reeds in a swamp and was cut level, from under one ear to another.

Klaas stood in a pair of timber shoes, that made an awful rattle when he ran fast to catch a rabbit, or scuffed slowly along to school over the brick road of his village. In summer Klaas was dressed in a rough, blue linen blouse. In winter he wore woollen breeches as wide as coffee bags. They were called bell trousers, and in shape were like a couple of cow-bells turned upwards. These were buttoned on to a thick warm jacket. Until he was five years old, Klaas was dressed like his sisters. Then, on his birthday, he had boy's clothes, with two pockets in them, of which he was proud enough.

Klaas was a farmer's boy. He had rye bread and fresh milk for breakfast. At dinner time, beside cheese and bread, he was given a plate heaped with boiled potatoes. Into these he first plunged a fork and then dipped each round, white ball into a bowl of hot melted butter. Very quickly then did potato and butter disappear "down the red lane." At supper, he had bread and skim milk, left after the cream had been taken off, with a

saucer, to make butter. Twice a week the children enjoyed a bowl of bonnyclabber or curds, with a little brown sugar sprinkled on the top. But at every meal there was cheese, usually in thin slices, which the boy thought not thick enough. When Klaas went to bed he usually fell asleep as soon as his shock of yellow hair touched the pillow. In summer time he slept till the birds began to sing, at dawn. In winter, when the bed felt warm and Jack Frost was lively, he often heard the cows talking, in their way, before he jumped out of his bag of straw, which served for a mattress. The Van Bommels were not rich, but everything was shining clean.

There was always plenty to eat at the Van Bommels' house. Stacks of rye bread, a yard long and thicker than a man's arm, stood on end in the corner of the cool, stone-lined basement. The loaves of dough were put in the oven once a week. Baking time was a great event at the Van Bommels' and no men-folks were allowed in the kitchen on that day, unless they were called in to help. As for the milk-pails and pans, filled or emptied, scrubbed or set in the sun every day to dry, and the cheeses, piled up in the pantry, they seemed sometimes enough to feed a small army.

But Klaas always wanted more cheese. In other ways, he was a good boy, obedient at home, always ready to work on the cow-farm, and diligent in school. But at the table he never had enough. Sometimes his father laughed and asked him if he had a well, or a cave, under his jacket.

Klaas had three younger sisters, Trintjé, Anneké and Saartjé; which is Dutch for Kate, Annie and Sallie. These, their fond mother, who loved them dearly, called her "orange blossoms"; but when at dinner, Klaas would keep on, dipping his potatoes into the hot butter, while others were all through, his mother would laugh and call him her Buttercup. But always Klaas wanted more cheese. When unusually greedy, she twitted him as a boy "worse than Butter-and-Eggs"; that is, as troublesome as the yellow and white plant, called toad-flax, is to the farmer—very pretty, but nothing but a weed.

One summer's evening, after a good scolding, which he deserved well, Klaas moped and, almost crying, went to bed in bad humor. He had teased each one of his sisters to give him her bit of cheese, and this, added to his own slice, made his stomach feel as heavy as lead.

Klaas's bed was up in the garret. When the house was first built, one of the red tiles of the roof had been taken out and another one, made of glass, was put in its place. In the morning, this gave the boy light to put on his clothes. At night, in fair weather, it supplied air to his room.

A gentle breeze was blowing from the pine woods on the sandy slope, not far away. So Klaas climbed up on the

stool to sniff the sweet piny odors. He thought he saw lights dancing under the tree. One beam seemed to approach his roof hole, and coming nearer played round the chimney. Then it passed to and fro in front of him. It seemed to whisper in his ear, as it moved by. It looked very much as if a hundred fire-flies had united their cold light into one lamp. Then Klaas thought that the strange beams bore the shape of a lovely girl, but he only laughed at himself at the idea. Pretty soon, however, he thought the whisper became a voice. Again, he laughed so heartily, that he forgot his moping and the scolding his mother had given him. In fact, his eyes twinkled with delight, when the voice gave this invitation:

“There’s plenty of cheese. Come with us.”

To make sure of it, the sleepy boy now rubbed his eyes and cocked his ears. Again, the light-bearer spoke to him: “Come.”

Could it be? He had heard old people tell of the ladies of the wood, that whispered and warned travellers. In fact, he himself had often seen the “fairies’ ring” in the pine woods. To this, the flame-lady was inviting him.

Again and again the moving, cold light circled round the red tile roof, which the moon, then rising and peeping over the chimneys, seemed to turn into silver plates. As the disc rose higher in the sky, he could hardly see the moving light, that had looked like a lady; but the voice, no longer a whisper, as at first, was now even plainer:

“There’s plenty of cheese. Come with us.”

“I’ll see what it is, anyhow,” said Klaas, as he drew on his thick woolen stockings and prepared to go downstairs and out, without waking a soul. At the door he stepped into his wooden shoes. Just then the cat purred and rubbed up against his shins. He jumped, for he was scared; but looking down, for a moment, he saw the two balls of yellow fire in her head and knew what they were. Then he sped to the pine woods and towards the fairy ring.

What an odd sight! At first Klaas thought it was a circle of big fire-flies. Then he saw clearly that there were dozens of pretty creatures, hardly as large as dolls, but as lively as crickets. They were as full of light, as if lamps had wings. Hand in hand, they flitted and danced around the ring of grass, as if this was fun.

Hardly had Klaas got over his first surprise, than of a sudden he felt himself surrounded by the fairies. Some of the strongest among them had left the main party in the circle and come to him. He felt himself pulled by their dainty fingers. One of them, the loveliest of all, whispered in his ear:

“Come, you must dance with us.”

Then a dozen of the pretty creatures murmured in chorus:

“Plenty of cheese here. Plenty of cheese here. Come, come!”

Upon this, the heels of Klaas seemed as light as a feather. In a moment, with both hands clasped in those of the fairies, he was dancing in high glee. It was as much fun as if he were at the kermis, with a row of boys and girls, hand in hand, swinging along the streets, as Dutch maids and youth do, during kermis week.

Klaas had not time to look hard at the fairies, for he was too full of the fun. He danced and danced, all night and until the sky in the east began to turn, first gray and then rosy. Then he tumbled down, tired out, and fell asleep. His head lay on the inner curve of the fairy ring, with his feet in the centre.

Klaas felt very happy, for he had no sense of being tired, and he did not know he was asleep. He thought his fairy partners, who had danced with him, were now waiting on him to bring him cheeses. With a golden knife, they sliced them off and fed him out of their own hands. How good it tasted! He thought now he could, and would, eat all the cheese he had longed for all his life. There was no mother to scold him, or daddy to shake his finger at him. How delightful!

But by and by, he wanted to stop eating and rest a while. His jaws were tired. His stomach seemed to be loaded with cannon-balls. He gasped for breath.



“Flying out of the sky—from the north, south, east and west—they came, bringing cheeses.”

Illustration by Rachel Robinson Elmer. Published in *Dutch Fairy Tales for Young Folks* (1919), Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

But the fairies would not let him stop, for Dutch fairies never get tired. Flying out of the sky—from the north, south, east and west—they came, bringing cheeses. These they dropped down around him, until the piles of the round masses threatened first to enclose him as with a wall, and then to overtop him. There were the red balls from Edam, the pink and yellow spheres from Gouda, and the gray loaf-shaped ones from Leyden. Down through the vista of sand, in the pine woods, he looked, and oh, horrors! There were the tallest and strongest of the fairies rolling along the huge, round, flat cheeses from Friesland! Any one of these was as big as a cart wheel, and would feed a regiment. The fairies trundled the heavy discs along, as if they were playing with hoops. They shouted hilariously, as, with a pine stick, they beat them forward like boys at play. Farm cheese, factory cheese, Alkmaar cheese, and, to crown all, cheese from Limburg—which Klaas never could bear, because of its strong odor. Soon the cakes and balls were heaped so high around him that the boy, as he looked up, felt like a frog in a well. He groaned when he thought the high cheese walls were tottering to fall on him. Then he screamed, but the fairies thought he was making music. They, not being human, do not know how a boy feels.

At last, with a thick slice in one hand and a big hunk in the other, he could eat no more cheese; though the fairies, led by their queen, standing on one side, or hovering over his head, still urged him to take more.

At this moment, while afraid that he would burst, Klaas saw the pile of cheeses, as big as a house, topple over. The heavy mass fell inwards upon him. With a scream of terror, he thought himself crushed as flat as a Friesland cheese.

But he wasn't! Waking up and rubbing his eyes, he saw the red sun rising on the sand-dunes. Birds were singing and the cocks were crowing all around him, in chorus, as if saluting him. Just then also the village clock chimed out the hour. He felt his clothes. They were wet with dew. He sat up to look around. There were no fairies, but in his mouth was a bunch of grass which he had been chewing lustily.

Klaas never would tell the story of his night with the fairies, nor has he yet settled the question whether they left him because the cheese-house of his dream had fallen, or because daylight had come.

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