

Saint Nicholas and the Children

Canadian Fairy Tales

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Intermediate
17 min read

Two little children lived with their old grandmother in a remote place in the Canadian forest. They were twin children—a boy and a girl, Pierre and Estelle by name—and except for their dress it was not easy to tell them apart. Their father and mother had died in the spring-time, and in the summer they had left their old home because of its many sad memories and had gone to live with their old grandmother in a new home elsewhere. In this new home in the forest where they now lived they were very poor, but they were not unhappy. Times were hard, and there was very little food to be had no matter how well their old grandmother worked; but they caught fish in the streams and gathered berries and fruit and birds' eggs on the wooded hills, and somehow throughout the summer they kept themselves from want. But when late autumn came and the streams were frozen over and the berries were all gone and there were no eggs, for the birds had all flown south, they were often hungry because they had so little to eat.

Their grandmother worked so hard to provide for herself and the children that at last she fell very sick. For several days she could not leave her bed. And she said, "I want meat broth to make me well and I must have good meat to make it. If I do not get meat I can have no broth, and if I do not get broth I shall not get well, and if I do not get well I shall die, and if I die you two children will surely starve and die too. So meat and meat alone can save us all from starvation and death."

So the two children, to keep themselves and their grandmother alive, set out one morning in search of meat to make the broth. They lived far from other people and they did not know where to go, but they followed the

forest path. The snow lay deep on the ground and sparkled brightly in the sunlight. The children had never before been away from home alone and every sight was of great interest to them. Here and there a rabbit hopped over the snow, or a snowbird hovered and twittered overhead, all looking for food like the children. And there were holly-berries growing in many places, and there was mistletoe hanging from the trees.

And Pierre when he saw the holly-berries and the mistletoe said, "Saint Nicholas will be soon here, for the trees are dressed and ready for his coming." And Estelle said, "Yes, Saint Nicholas will be soon here." And they were both very glad thinking of his coming.

As they went along in the afternoon, they came upon an old man sitting at the door of a small house of spruce-boughs under the trees close to the forest path. He was busy making whistles, whittling willow wands with a knife and tapping gently on the bark until the bark loosened from the wood and slipped easily off. The children stood and watched him at his strange work, for he had merry twinkling eyes, and a kindly weather-beaten face, and thick white hair, and they were not afraid.

"Hello," said the old man.

"Hello," said Pierre, "why are you making willow whistles?"

"I am making them for Saint Nicholas," said the old man; "he is coming soon for his yearly visit; indeed he is already in the land; when he makes his rounds he always gives whistles, among other things, to good children, and I must have a great store of them ready for him when he comes, for there are many children to supply."

Then he went on whittling busily with his knife. The children watched him for a long time in silence, and they thought what a fine thing it must be to work like the old man for Saint Nicholas, in his little house of boughs under the forest trees. Then the old man said, "You are very small children; what are you seeking so far away from people?"

And Estelle answered, "Our old grandmother is very sick, and we are looking for meat to make broth to make her well." The old man was sorry he had no meat, for he lived on other food. He told them that some distance farther along there was a butcher who always kept meat; but the butcher, he said, was a very wicked fellow and sometimes little children who entered his shop never came out again. The children were very frightened when they heard what the old man said and they wondered if they had better go back home.

But the old man thought for a long time in silence as he whittled his willow wands, and then he said, "I will give you each a whistle, and when you blow it, Saint Nicholas will always hear it; you must never blow it except when you are in great trouble or distress, and when Saint Nicholas hears it he will know that you are coming to grief or that harm is already upon you and he will come himself or send some one to your assistance. But you must blow only one blast. The whistle should be given only by Saint Nicholas himself when he comes at holly-time into the land. But you are good children and your old grandmother is sick, and you are trying to make her well, and I know that Saint Nicholas will not say that I have done wrong." So he gave the children each a whistle, and then fear left them, for they knew they could now come to no harm if they had the aid of Saint Nicholas.

It was growing late in the afternoon and the children set out on their way to find the wicked butcher. But they had many misgivings, and as they went on they grew faint of heart, for they wondered if the old man had told them the truth about the whistles or if he was in reality a secret agent of the wicked butcher trying to lure them to their death. They resolved to search for meat elsewhere and to keep away from the butcher's shop.

For a long time they searched, but without success. There was no meat to be had in all the land at any of the places they stopped to ask. Soon they came in sight of the butcher's shop. They were very frightened. But the sun had already gone down behind the trees, and night was coming on, and they had still no meat. And they knew that if their old grandmother was to get well she must have meat to make broth. The shop, too, looked very pleasant and attractive in the cold winter evening. Warm light was shining from a fire through the door, and in the windows were sausages, and fat birds, and big yellow pumpkins and cakes with red berries on the top. The children were hungry and wished for something to eat by the warm shop fire. They decided to enter the shop notwithstanding their fear, to buy some food, and to get meat for their grandmother's broth as quickly as they could.

But before they entered the shop they thought it would be well, in order to be safe, to blow a blast on their whistle as the old man had told them so that Saint Nicholas would know that they were in dread of harm. They stood for a time in the shadow of the great trees before the door and made ready to blow together. Pierre gave the signal and blew a long soft blast. But Estelle could not get her whistle from her pocket and Pierre had finished his blast, all out of breath, before she was ready to blow. "Don't blow now," he said, "you are just like a girl, always too late." But blow she would, as the old man had told her, and before Pierre could stop her she blew a long soft blast on her whistle. Pierre was very cross, for he thought that now no good could come of it, as two blasts had sounded, but with his sister he entered the butcher's shop.

The wicked butcher was in his shop, but not another person was about the place. It was all very quiet. The man was very glad to see the children and he seated them by the warm fire, and gave them food, and although he shut the door tight behind them, their fear soon vanished. After they had eaten well and were warm again, they asked for meat to make broth for their old grandmother, and the butcher said he would give them plenty of good meat although it was very scarce in all the land. There was a barrel standing in one corner; in another corner was a large hogshead reaching almost to the ceiling, and the butcher said that both of these were full of meat.

Now the butcher was really the friend and partner of a wicked giant who lived in the forest. The giant's greatest delight was to eat little children. He liked no meal so well as a meal of little children, two at a time, pickled first in brine. He ate them always when he could get them, but he was not always successful in his search, for

children were scarce in the land. He was a great hunter and he was able to kill many animals in the forest and to secure much meat, so great was his strength, and once a week regularly he brought a great load of meat to the butcher and traded it for any little children the butcher managed to entice into his shop. So the butcher got much meat at little cost. And the old man of the house of boughs was right when he said that many little children who entered the shop never came out again.

The butcher was very glad when he saw the two pretty little children. He was expecting the giant that evening on his weekly visit, and he thought gleefully of the great load of meat he would get from the giant in exchange for the children, for he would ask a big price, and he knew the giant would give all the meat he had for so good a meal. And he thought too of all the money he would get for the giant's load of meat. So he resolved to kill the children and pickle them in brine to await the giant's coming.

When the children had finished their meal and had warmed themselves by the fire they made ready to go home and they asked for their meat. The butcher said he would get it for them. They looked up at the shelves, laden with more food than they had ever seen before—hams and cabbages and strings of onions. And the little children said, "There are good onions up there; we will buy some and take them home to our grandmother to put in her broth." The butcher said, "There are many kinds of onions in the box on the high shelf. You must pick out the kind you want. I will lift you up to the shelf so that you can see for yourselves."

So he caught them each by the coat between the shoulders, and because of his great strength he lifted them high until they could look into the box and pick out the onions they wanted. As he took them down he thrust them straight out from his body at arm's length and held them there and they laughed because of his great strength. Then he brought them together with terrible force so that their heads struck one against the other and they were stunned by the cruel blow. Then he threw them head first into the barrel in the corner which was filled with brine, not with meat as he had said, and he left them there to pickle well. He was greatly pleased with the fine load of meat he would get in exchange from the giant, who, he knew, would appear before many minutes had passed.

Soon the giant arrived. He carried on his back a great load of meat and he also drew a sled heavily laden with many dressed carcasses of animals he had killed. "What cheer for me tonight and what fortune?" he said to the butcher as he entered the warm shop with his load. And the butcher said, "Good cheer and fine fortune. I have

a good fat pair for you tonight already pickling in the brine.”

Then he uncovered the barrel in the corner and showed the giant the two little children sticking head first in the pickle. The giant smacked his fat lips and chuckled and rubbed his great hands, so pleased was he with the sight of so good a meal. And he said, “We will let them steep well in the brine until tomorrow. I always like them very salty.” They covered up the barrel, and then they bargained about the purchase of the meat.

The giant agreed to give the butcher all his meat in exchange for the children. Then they sat by the fire drinking and eating until far on into the night. And the giant said that before they went to bed he would take another look at the children to see how they were pickling. So they went and uncovered the barrel.

Now it chanced that Saint Nicholas was in the land at that time, as the old man of the House-of-boughs had said. He had come into the land to bring his yearly gifts to little children. In the evening he was many miles away from the butcher’s shop. But he heard the long soft blast of a whistle, borne on the still evening wind. He knew it to be one of his own whistles, and it told him that little children were in danger. But it was followed by another soft blast—the late blast of Estelle’s whistle—and the two blasts meant that the danger was not yet very near to the children, that indeed it was far off, so he thought that there was no need to hurry to the children’s aid. Moreover, Saint Nicholas was just then leaving tiny dolls for little babies in many little houses in the forest and he decided to take his time and finish the giving of all these gifts before he set out to the place from which the whistle-blast had come.

At last he was able to go on his way. The snow lay deep in the forest, and travelling was hard, but the white winter moon was shining, and the path was bright and Saint Nicholas moved along quickly on his snow-shoes. Far on in the night he reached the butcher’s shop from which he knew the children’s note of fear had come. As he entered the shop, the giant and the butcher were just taking their last look before going to bed at the children sticking in the barrel of brine. They did not know Saint Nicholas, but when they saw him they quickly placed the cover on the barrel and were very much confused. Saint Nicholas was suspicious that they were about some wickedness, and he knew well that in some way or other the barrel was connected with the dreaded harm of which the children’s whistle had told him, and he thought that perhaps the children were hidden in it. So he said, “I have come for meat. I want meat that has been pickled in brine. I should like a piece from that barrel.” But the butcher said, “It is not good meat. I have better meat in the inner room, and I will get it for

you.” So the butcher and Saint Nicholas entered the inner room and closed the door behind them while the giant sat on the barrel in the corner, trying to hide it with his great fat legs.

In the inner room was a barrel filled with brine, but with only a small piece of meat at the bottom. Saint Nicholas said he would take that piece. The butcher bent far into the barrel to reach down in search of the meat. But as he did so, Saint Nicholas picked him up by the legs and pushed him head first into the barrel of brine. He spluttered and kicked, but he stuck fast in the barrel, and could not get out. Saint Nicholas placed the cover on the barrel, with a great weight on top of it, and that was the end of the wicked butcher.

Then Saint Nicholas returned to the shop where the giant was waiting, still sitting on the barrel. He told the giant that he wanted a piece of meat that lay in the bottom of the large hogshead of pickle in the other corner. He asked the giant to get it for him, as the hogshead was so high that neither he nor the butcher could reach down into it.

The giant bent far into the hogshead and began groping for the meat at the bottom. Saint Nicholas took a large bone that lay on the floor, and standing on a box beside the hogshead he struck the giant a powerful blow on the head. The giant was only slightly stunned, but in his surprise he lost his balance, and fell head first into the brine. He yelled and kicked for a time, but his huge shoulders stuck fast. Saint Nicholas covered the hogshead, leaving the giant sticking fast in the pickle, and that was the end of the giant.

Then Saint Nicholas uncovered the barrel in the corner into which he had seen the butcher and the giant looking when he had first entered the shop. There were the two children standing on their heads in the pickle with their feet sticking out at the top. He caught them by the legs and pulled them out and by his magic power he soon brought them back to life. He gave them food and warmed them by the fire and soon they were none the worse for their hour in the barrel of brine.

Then he gave them meat and brought them back to their grandmother. And they made broth for her and soon made her well, and they were all happy again. And the land was troubled no more by giants, for Saint Nicholas never again allowed great harm to come to little children if they always kept his whistle near them and blew softly upon it when they were in trouble or distress.

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