

Vsevolod Nestaiiko
In the Land
of the
Sunbeam Bunnies







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A Fairy Tale



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1. THE REFUGE OF KIND FRIENDS.

On the shore of a warm sea, amid evergreen forests, blue hills, and sunny valleys, lies Freckleland. Its inhabitants, the Frecklelanders, are covered with freckles from head to toe. Young and old, men and women, they are all freckled. Even the animals and birds are freckled: there are freckled horses and cows, freckled elephants, bears and crocodiles and freckled cats and dogs. And what is more, even the flies and mosquitoes there are sprinkled with freckles.

The Frecklelanders had lived here since olden times. They were a quiet, peaceful, hard-working people who had magic orchards with trees of sweets that you wouldn't find anywhere else in the world. Twice a year, they gathered tasty chocolate fruit from these trees. The Frecklelanders were very fond of children and grew chocolate trees just because their fruit brought joy to the boys and girls.

Freckleland was once a free, independent country. And although its freckled citizens were uneducated and could neither read nor write, they knew nothing of slavery or cruelty.

But one day, foreign ships under black sails entered the Bay of Please in Freckleland. It was a flotilla from a far-off land called Hooligania. The Hooliganian army spilled out onto the shore and occupied the whole of Freckleland. They started to plunder and destroy the country and to bully its people. The Hooliganians forced the Frecklelanders to work for them day and night.



Life was hard for these peaceful people. Maybe, it was the children who suffered most. The Hooliganians not only wanted the children to go hungry (they had long forgotten the taste of chocolate candy, and even of ordinary bread), they just didn't leave the little Frecklelanders in peace. They caught them in the streets, beat them up, and terrified them with black Hooliganian dogs. It gave the Hooliganians great pleasure to see children suffer and cry.

The Frecklelanders rebelled against the invaders many times, trying to free themselves and rid the country of these cruel overlords. But each time the well-armed Hooliganians won and dealt cruelly with the insurgents. The invaders possessed some unknown magical power that made them mighty and invincible. However hard the Frecklelanders resisted, they could not overcome this cruel, hostile power. Their hopes of freedom were growing fainter and fainter.

The Frecklelanders were especially worried about their children. They had to be saved at all costs. The Frecklelanders could not keep calm when they saw how the Hooliganians mistreated the little ones.

And then, Grandad Wizard came to help the Frecklelanders.

A famous hunter in Freckleland, he had lived all his life in the forests hunting wild animals. No one knew how old he was. Even the oldest people remembered that he had been an old man when they were children. His face was so wrinkled that his freckles were hidden. Grandad Wizard was very wise, and some people said he even understood the language of animals and birds and often talked to them in the forest. Of course, no one ever saw him doing that, but there must have been some reason why he was called a Wizard.

Since the Frecklelanders had great respect for Grandad Wizard, they agreed immediately to his idea of hiding the children in a tropical forest. He knew a place, deep in the forest, that was surrounded by such thickets that no Hooliganian would ever get through. Only





Grandad Wizard knew the way there—here Freckleland ended and the Blue Rocky Mountains began.

One morning the Hooliganians woke up and were astonished to find that all the children had disappeared from Freckleland.

Not one boy or girl was left in the whole land. The Hooliganians were furious. They searched high and low throughout the land, but couldn't find a single broken toy. It seemed that there had never been any children in Freckleland at all. The Hooliganians ranted and raved, but the Frecklelanders said nothing and even pretended to be very worried that their children had suddenly disappeared.

Meanwhile, deep in the tropical forest, an unusual colony sprang up on a large clearing. It was called the Refuge of Kind Friends. Behind a fence stood a tall house surrounded by neat little cottages and green orchards. Farther on lay a vegetable garden and a large meadow.

The only grown-ups in the colony were Grandad Wizard and two nannies who looked after the tiny tots. The children had built the colony themselves under Grandad Wizard's directions. But, of course, they would never have coped with this task had it not been for their kind, unusual helpers.

Grandad Wizard must truly have known animal language, because many animals were his friends and came to help. Moles dug the pit for the foundation. Mighty mountain eagles from the neighbouring Rocky Mountains brought stones. Monkeys worked as steeplejacks. Beavers felled and barked trees. Porcupines gave their strong sharp quills for use as nails.

But the little builders received the greatest help from the huge, kind, freckled elephants who acted like cranes. It was as easy as pie for them to hoist heavy logs to any height. Without them the children would never have put up the walls of the big two-storey house.

It was quiet and safe for the children in the colony. No one hurt them, no one picked on them. They did everything themselves.

They worked the land, planted fruit trees, and did household chores themselves. The boys worked in the garden and fields, chopped wood, carried water from the well—in short, did the men's work. The girls prepared the meals, washed the dishes and mended clothes, and did the washing. Of course, all this was done under the guidance of Grandad Wizard and the nannies, who gave the children advice.

Yet there was one thing wrong, the children missed their parents very much. Grandad Wizard found an answer to this problem too. Once a month he brought the parents to the colony in turns. They stayed a day or two and then went back home so as not to arouse suspicion among the Hooliganians. In the colony, special guest rooms for the parents were set aside in the house on the second floor. Since Grandad Wizard was strict on order and justice, he started a register in which he entered the names of all who visited the colony and when.



2. FRECKLES

Grandad Wizard loved all the children in the colony, and treated them all kindly. But he was particularly friendly with one who became his first assistant. This was probably because he was the only boy who never had visits from relations. His parents and all his relations had died during an uprising against the Hooliganians, so the boy had been left an orphan.

He was nine years old, and his name was Freckles. No one had ever seen him cry, although there must have been times when he was sad and depressed. All the children saw their parents at least once a month, but he didn't even have anyone to expect.

Small as he was, Freckles was a very brave and kind boy. Whenever he saw anyone sad, he thought up some funny joke to amuse and cheer up his friend in whatever way he could.



Everyone liked Freckles very much. Even Grandad Wizard's forest friends, the birds and animals, warmed towards Freckles. He treated them to all sorts of sweets and often played with them.

Freckles' closest friends were the Elephant Breus and the Monkey Mazliuka. The boy made friends with the lop-eared giant who led a herd of elephants when the colony was being built. Sitting on Breus's back, Freckles gave orders which the elephant carried out to the letter. They worked together with Mazliuka who was a steeplejack. Their friendship grew stronger with each passing day. After the colony had been built, Elephant Breus and Monkey Mazliuka started visiting Freckles. Breus gave the children a ride on his broad back, while Mazliuka made them laugh with all sorts of tricks and capers.

Grandad Wizard sometimes allowed Freckles to make short trips into the forest with Breus and Mazliuka. Freckles would climb onto the elephant's back with Mazliuka at his side, and Breus would push through the dense tropical thicket like a tank. These were exciting trips. What strange plants Freckles saw, what strange animals he came across! There were flowers with petals so huge that even a grown-up man could sit easily on them, tiny humming birds the size of a fly, lizards two metres long, and trees no taller than the grass.

The boy enjoyed every one of these trips, because he was a great nature-lover.

Once the three friends set off into the forest. Freckles was feeling cheerful and hummed a song. Elephant Breus was in a good mood too and trotted along briskly, waving his trunk from side to side. Everyone felt wonderful. They didn't notice that they had strayed far from the colony.

Suddenly, a shot rang through the air, then a second and a third. Mazliuka shrieked and fell to the ground. Breus stopped in his tracks, then he started to go down on his knees, heaved a sigh, and collapsed on his side. Freckles fell into the bushes, struck

his head against something and lost consciousness.

When he opened his eyes, he saw three big Hooliganians standing over him with rifles in their hands. He recognized them immediately. They were the notorious Bill Rascal, John Deebull and Tom Spider.



Bill Rascal was a tall, lean man with a hooked nose and one eye; John Deebull was also tall, but he was fat, had a shaggy black beard, and a limp; Tom Spider was hairy all over, with a big belly and long, thin arms, which made him look very much like a spider.

All three looked intently at Freckles but said nothing. Freckles froze expecting the worst.

At long last, Tom Spider said:

“Hm... Where did this boy come from?”

“Very strange! How did he get here?” Bill Rascal said, narrowing his single eye suspiciously.

“Hey you! What are you doing here?” John Deebull bellowed.

But Freckles kept mum. What could he say? He couldn't tell them where the colony was!

“Are you dumb, or what?! Can't you speak?” John Deebull bellowed still louder. “Answer when you're asked.”

But Freckles just shook his head silently: let them think he was dumb!

“Wait a minute, I think I got it! ” Bill Rascal cried. “The kids must be hiding in this forest somewhere around here. And he's just one of them.”

“You're right, Bill! Oh, those little monkeys! ” Tom Spider and John Deebull shrieked with joy, interrupting each other. “Take us there immediately! Show us where the runaways are hiding right away! ”

Seeing that Freckles didn't budge, John Deebull snatched the big knife tucked in his belt and raised it threateningly over the boy:

“Take us there, or it'll be the end of you! ”

Another second and we'd have said goodbye to Freckles. He realized this only too well. There was no use dying so senselessly! So Freckles got to his feet and led the Hooliganians into the forest thicket.

Do you really think Freckles led them to the colony? Oh no! He'd rather die than betray his friends. Freckles decided to take the Hooliganians deep into the tropical forest as far away from the colony as possible—and die there. He had no other choice.

Freckles walked in front, followed by John Deebull, then came Bill Rascal, while Tom Spider trailed behind. Freckles' hands

were tied with a strong rope behind his back. John Deebull held the end of it in his hands. There was no hope of escape.

He walked on with a sadly drooping head, without looking round. The boy didn't want to die. The birds twittered in the thickets so merrily, the flowers bloomed so beautifully in the grass, the sun shone so radiantly through the green maze of leaves. Life in such a world was so wonderful. Was this really the last sunlight Freckles would ever see in his life? Farewell, sun! Farewell, sky!

All of a sudden, John Deebull shrieked wildly, and Freckles felt the Hooliganian let go of the rope. The boy turned round. John Deebull had walked smack into a tree. Something had blinded him and he couldn't see anything. Bill Rascal and Tom Spider were also whirling round in circles, covering their eyes with their hands. Some fiery dazzling splotches were darting across their faces. Although the three Hooliganians yelled and cursed, they were as helpless as kittens.

Freckles was quick to seize his opportunity and took to his heels.

He zigzagged through the forest for a long time so as to throw the Hooliganians off his tracks. Now and then he stopped and listened to find out whether he was being pursued. But he couldn't hear anything: the Hooliganians must have been still busy fighting the mysterious dazzling menace.

When Freckles reached the Refuge of Kind Friends, it was already night, but no one was asleep there because they were all waiting anxiously for Freckles to return.

With bated breath, the children listened to the boy's story about his frightening adventure in the forest. When they learned of the tragic death of the kindly Elephant Breus and the merry Monkey Mazliuka, many of them could not hold back their tears. Freckles also broke down and sobbed. He, too, could not stop the stream of tears.

That night the boy could not fall asleep for a long time. He lay

in bed with his eyes wide open, wondering how they could possibly live in a country ruled by cruel invaders. Would it never end? Wasn't there any way the Hooliganians could be defeated? Was it really impossible to beat the dark, magical power which supported the Hooliganians and made them invincible?

Strangely enough, Grandad Wizard seemed to have read Freckles' thoughts. The boy didn't notice the old hunter silently approach his bed. He sat down on the edge, and said:

"Don't be sad, Freckles. Cheer up, my boy! The Hooliganians will not rule our land for long. Better times lie ahead, believe me. You know, I forgot to tell you: I had a strange, bright and happy dream the other night. I dreamed that all the evil and hostile forces were perishing, the rule of the Hooliganians was collapsing, and everything dark and evil in this world was vanishing. For some reason I saw you, Freckles, in that dream. You were going through some unusual adventures—but I don't remember exactly what they were. You were a hero fighting and defeating someone. You were happy..."

Freckles didn't know whether Grandad Wizard was telling the truth or just trying to comfort him. In any case, the boy instantly felt at ease and drifted off to sleep.

In time, the dreadful experience in the forest was forgotten, as usually happens with everything unpleasant and bad. Very ra-

rely did anyone think about it. Yet there was something that baffled everyone: what had dazed the Hooliganians and given Frecles the chance to escape?

However hard they tried, they couldn't understand it.

So far, it remained an unsolved mystery





3. THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER

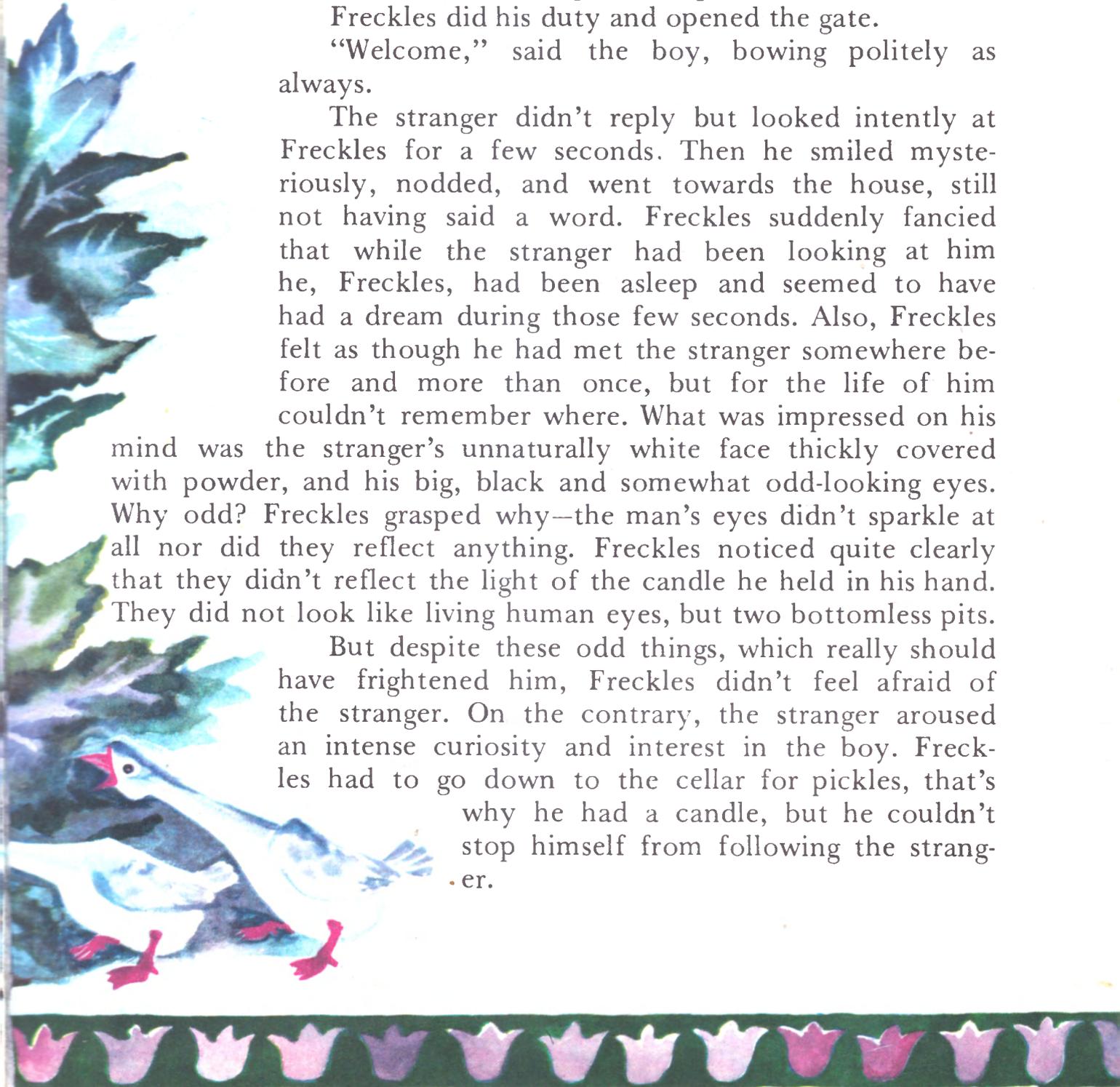
One evening, a stranger knocked on the gate of the colony. He was small, lean, with a big head. Although it was a warm evening, he was wrapped in a black velvet cloak, its hood pulled down over his forehead as if protecting him from rain.

Freckles did his duty and opened the gate.

“Welcome,” said the boy, bowing politely as always.

The stranger didn't reply but looked intently at Freckles for a few seconds. Then he smiled mysteriously, nodded, and went towards the house, still not having said a word. Freckles suddenly fancied that while the stranger had been looking at him he, Freckles, had been asleep and seemed to have had a dream during those few seconds. Also, Freckles felt as though he had met the stranger somewhere before and more than once, but for the life of him couldn't remember where. What was impressed on his mind was the stranger's unnaturally white face thickly covered with powder, and his big, black and somewhat odd-looking eyes. Why odd? Freckles grasped why—the man's eyes didn't sparkle at all nor did they reflect anything. Freckles noticed quite clearly that they didn't reflect the light of the candle he held in his hand. They did not look like living human eyes, but two bottomless pits.

But despite these odd things, which really should have frightened him, Freckles didn't feel afraid of the stranger. On the contrary, the stranger aroused an intense curiosity and interest in the boy. Freckles had to go down to the cellar for pickles, that's why he had a candle, but he couldn't stop himself from following the stranger.



The new arrival stood by Grandad Wizard's reception desk while the old man entered the stranger in the visitor's book. Freckles peeped over Grandad Wizard's shoulder, and read:

"Mr. Gloom, staying for three days' sojourn. Room No. 13."

The stranger studied Freckles again, and then, addressing the old hunter, asked:

"Is this your son?"

The visitor had a strange voice, too. It sounded dull as if it came from underground.

"Yes, Mr. Gloom," Grandad Wizard hastened to reply. "Well, that is, no, Mr. Gloom. He's an orphan, but he's like a son to me. You know—"

The old man wanted to say something, but suddenly stopped in mid-sentence. He said later that he suddenly forgot what he wanted to say, a thing that had never happened to him before. Just like Freckles, he seemed to have fallen asleep for a couple of seconds and couldn't remember what had happened in that time.

Mr. Gloom climbed the stairs to the first floor and shut himself in his room. The news of his arrival spread through the colony like wild fire. And no wonder, because there had never been a stranger in the colony before. Everyone should have been surprised and excited, but no sooner had the children thought about him than they became irresistibly sleepy, although it was still early and the day had only just begun to draw to a close. Within a few



minutes, everyone was sleeping like a log in the colony. Many didn't even manage to reach their beds. Grandad Wizard fell asleep right at his reception desk, the cook sank down near her stove, while Freckles himself fell into a deep sleep on the stairs up to the first floor. Of course, no one noticed Mr. Gloom leaving his room at the dead of night. No one saw him bending over Freckles, and looking at him for a long time. Strangely, all the people in the colony had frightful dreams that night and screamed because of the horrors and nightmares that choked them in their sleep.

The strangest thing of all—they all awoke at dawn, in the early morning light. Once awake, they immediately forgot about the mysterious stranger, as though he hadn't appeared in the colony at all, and went about their work as usual. But they did feel a certain uneasiness as if someone invisible was watching them all the time.

Only at midday did Mr. Gloom go out into the yard for a walk and it was then that everyone remembered the strange events that had occurred after his arrival.

It was a hot day. Everyone withdrew into the shade. But Mr. Gloom went out for a walk, wearing the same black velvet cloak, and with the hood pulled over his face as before. Just like this he walked about uncaringly under the burning sun. The children looked on bewildered at this weird man, and they began to get frightened.

But shortly afterwards, Mr. Gloom disappeared into his room, and the people in the colony forgot about him at once as though they had never seen him.

Mr. Gloom stayed at the Refuge of Kind Friends for three days. During this time the same thing always happened: whenever the children saw the stranger, they thought about him; as soon as he shut himself up in his room, he was immediately forgotten. As soon as night drew in, everyone fell asleep straight away as though at somebody's command. All through the night they were troubled by horrible nightmares. They always woke up at dawn, every morning—all of them at the same time like soldiers.

Mr. Gloom continued to walk around the garden in his black cloak, regardless of the blistering heat.



But everything comes to an end, even the most puzzling events.

On the third day towards evening, Freckles was sweeping the corridor on the first floor near Room No. 13.

The sun had already set, and it was getting dark. Candles were lit in the colony. Freckles' broom swept up a button that someone had lost in the corridor. The button rolled under the door. He tried to get it back from under there with the broom, but without success. The door was ajar, so Freckles peeped into the room. What he saw there made him shudder. Firstly, he remembered Mr. Gloom right away, because he could see him. Secondly...

Mr. Gloom stood in the middle of the room wearing his black cloak, and holding a black handkerchief in his outstretched hand. Embroidered on the handkerchief in dazzling yellow threads was a bunny, an ordinary long-eared bunny, only bright yellow. In his other hand, he clutched a long sharp knife with which he frenziedly stabbed the yellow bunny again and again. Freckles' eyes popped out with surprise—what was it all about?!

Presently, the stranger muttered some oath, and with a flick of his hand, threw the handkerchief into a corner where a night table stood with a lighted candle on it. That instant three huge death's-head moths fluttered down from the ceiling. Freckles knew these moths very well: on their backs they had a pattern resembling a skull. The moths



picked up the handkerchief and carried it through the air back to Mr. Gloom.

Freckles even pinched himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. But no, everything he saw was real. What happened next almost made him die of fright. Mr. Gloom stared across the room at the candle on the night table. Freckles saw quite clearly that the stranger did not blow or wave his hand but just looked at the candle—and under his gaze the candlelight slowly dimmed and then went out. The room became dark. Yet Freckles could still see the stranger—his black outline standing out against the window. Judging from the movement of Mr. Gloom's hands, the boy realized that the stranger was taking off his cloak. Presently he threw back the hood, pulled at a sleeve, took the cloak off his shoulders, and let it fall to the floor. The boy started and shrank away from the door. There was nothing under that cloak. Mr. Gloom seemed to have disappeared into the darkness. That moment, Freckles' eyes closed against his will, and he collapsed by the door in a deep sleep.





4. THE UNEXPECTED OFFER

When he awoke at dawn, Freckles couldn't for the life of him remember how he'd fallen asleep by Room No. 13. He knew that he'd crept up to the door and looked into the room. But what he had seen and why he had suddenly fallen asleep was a mystery to him. Quite honestly, during these three days, the people in the colony had become used to dropping off to sleep in the strangest of places and so nothing surprised them any more. Even so, Freckles was overcome with curiosity: what on earth had happened behind that door, what?! All morning he wracked his brains over it—but he simply could not remember.

It didn't even help him to peep inside the room again. He didn't see anything interesting there. In the sunlit room, the black cloak was still lying on the floor, while Mr. Gloom must have been sleeping quietly in his bed which Freckles could not see through the crack. In the end, Freckles couldn't remember anything. He felt uneasy and scared, as though something unexpected and unpleasant could happen at any moment. And that is exactly what happened.

As Freckles was drawing some water out of the well, some unknown force made him suddenly drop the pail right into the water, run to the house, climb the stairs to the first floor, and knock on the door of Room No. 13. He asked himself in horror, "Oh, my goodness, what am I doing? What for?" But his feet were already carrying him as though they didn't belong to him.

"Come in! I'm waiting for you!" he heard the voice of Mr. Gloom.

Freckles opened the door and went in. At first, the room seemed empty. But then he turned around and saw Mr. Gloom in a dark corner. Mr. Gloom was already wearing his cloak, its hood, as usual, hanging over his face.



“Come nearer, boy,” Mr. Gloom said. “Don’t be afraid. I won’t harm you. On the contrary, I want to ask you a favour. You must come with me on a long journey and help me with one thing. I won’t tell you now what it is. You’ll soon find out for yourself. The only thing I can say is that it won’t be a difficult task. You’ll get a lot of money as a reward. Agreed?”

Mr. Gloom’s horrible black eyes stared unblinkingly at Freckles. Just looking at them made shivers run down the boy’s spine. He was about to say, “I wouldn’t go with you for anything!” and run away, but instead he mumbled against his will:

“Of course, I agree. I’ll gladly go.” Only then did he force himself to add: “But what will Grandad Wizard think about it? He might not let me go.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Mr. Gloom said, smiling. “We’ll talk with him right now, and I hope he won’t object.”

Along with Mr. Gloom, the boy left the room as if in a daze and went down to the old hunter.

When he found out what was going on, Grandad Wizard was very surprised. That much could be seen by the expression on his face. Freckles hoped Grandad Wizard would say: “Oh no, Mr. Gloom. Unfortunately, I couldn’t possibly let the boy go with you. He’s my first assistant, and without him I’m as good as helpless.” But something quite different happened.

“Of course, Mr. Gloom,” Grandad Wizard said. “With great pleasure. Take the boy with you for good if you want. I don’t need him at all. Please do.”

It was obvious he was not saying what he really thought. Later on, Grandad Wizard confessed that something had clouded his mind and he didn’t understand what had happened. But it couldn’t be helped—it just happened.

Mr. Gloom came to an understanding with the old hunter, and Freckles had to prepare for the journey. It didn’t take him very long to get ready. He wrapped all his belongings into a small bundle: worn-down shoes, a jacket made out of his mother’s woollen



cardigan, two sets of underclothes, and a broken penknife he had inherited from his father. They set off that very day. Everyone in the colony came out to see them off. Many had tears in their eyes. It grieved everyone to part with Freckles.



5. THE MAGIC MIRROR

By now, the colony, the meadow, and the Blue Rocky Mountains were far away.

Freckles and Mr. Gloom walked down a road, across a barren, sun-scorched plain. Freckles could barely move his legs they were so tired. Mr. Gloom, however, wouldn't stop to rest.

"It's all right. Just be patient for a while. Soon it will grow dark, and then it'll be easier straightaway," he told the boy.

Freckles looked anxiously at the slowly setting sun. At long last it disappeared and dusk covered the ground. There was just one little ray of red light on the horizon, the last, fading reflection of the sun. Then Mr. Gloom suddenly waved his cloak. It seemed to Freckles that this movement made the sun vanish completely and darkness fall. That instant Mr. Gloom picked up the boy in his arms, and they took off into the night. The wind whistled in Freckles' ears and took his breath away. He felt they were flying high above the ground through a black sky. His tiredness completely disappeared, but on the other hand, a stark, chilling fear made his heart stop. The boy had only ever experienced such fear during a nightmare when he hadn't had enough strength either to scream or stir.



Freckles didn't remember how long they were flying. Presently, he felt solid ground beneath his feet. All around huge mountains towered over them. Their snow-capped summits were lit up by the moon which was peeping from behind a cloud. Right in front of Freckles was a lake. A fresh breeze rippled the blue water, and little waves, sparkling and silvery in the moonlight, lapped against the bank. Reeds rustled along the shore, and wild ducks, diving for fish, skimmed across the lake.

Unexpectedly, before Freckles' very eyes, this ordinary lake froze as though covered with ice. The surface became smooth and motionless like glass. The ducks took off and flew away. The lake started to shrink visibly and suddenly rose into a wall. It was no longer a lake but a mirror set in a frame carved in the shape of reeds.

"Well, here we are," said Mr. Gloom. "On the other side of the mirror is the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. We must reach it. Have you ever heard about this land?"

Oh, yes, indeed he had! Freckles couldn't help smiling. Of course, he had heard a lot about this remarkable land!

Long, long ago, when he was a very little boy, his favourite game was to reflect sunbeams with his mother's mirror and watch the dazzling sun spots bounce across the walls, ceiling, father's back, and make his old freckled cat snort and shut his eyes whenever the sun dazzled him. The boy had thought then that they were called sunbeam bunnies just for fun. He didn't know that they had long ears, legs and little short tails—just like real bunnies, only yellow and made out of sunbeams. When he grew up, he was told all about it by his old grandmother who knew everything. Grannie also told him about the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies, where they lived and how every morning they left there to scatter all over the world to do good deeds. They do a lot of good things and always help anyone in trouble. But they are extremely modest and don't like to be thanked. That's why they aren't recognized as bunnies. You can't possibly thank a shapeless sunbeam! Also,

they don't tell anyone about their land, and so no one knows where it is.

Freckles dreamed of seeing a real, live Sunbeam Bunny. Once he was lucky enough to see one.

One spring morning, he woke up at dawn. He was awake, but hadn't yet opened his eyes. He felt as though something soft and gentle was tickling his face. Freckles opened his eyes just a tiny weeny bit. And what do you think he saw? On his cheek sat a little Sunbeam Bunny holding a tiny golden brush in one paw, and a little golden pail with red paint in the other. The Sunbeam Bunny dipped the brush in the pail and painted freckles all over the boy's nose. Gosh! So really the Sunbeam Bunnies painted freckles on faces. To have a better look at him, the boy opened his eyes wider. The Sunbeam Bunny disappeared immediately: he had thought that the boy was asleep, otherwise he'd have disappeared earlier.

From that day on the boy was very proud of his freckles and told everyone how he had seen a Sunbeam Bunny. He talked about it so often and so much that in the end they started calling him Freckles.

But he had never dreamed he would one day visit the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. Freckles looked excitedly at Mr. Gloom. Suddenly an alarming thought flashed across his mind: why was Mr. Gloom so set on going to the Land of the kind Sunbeam Bunnies? What did he want there? What was he up to?



6. THE MANAGER OF THE OFFICE OF NIGHTMARES

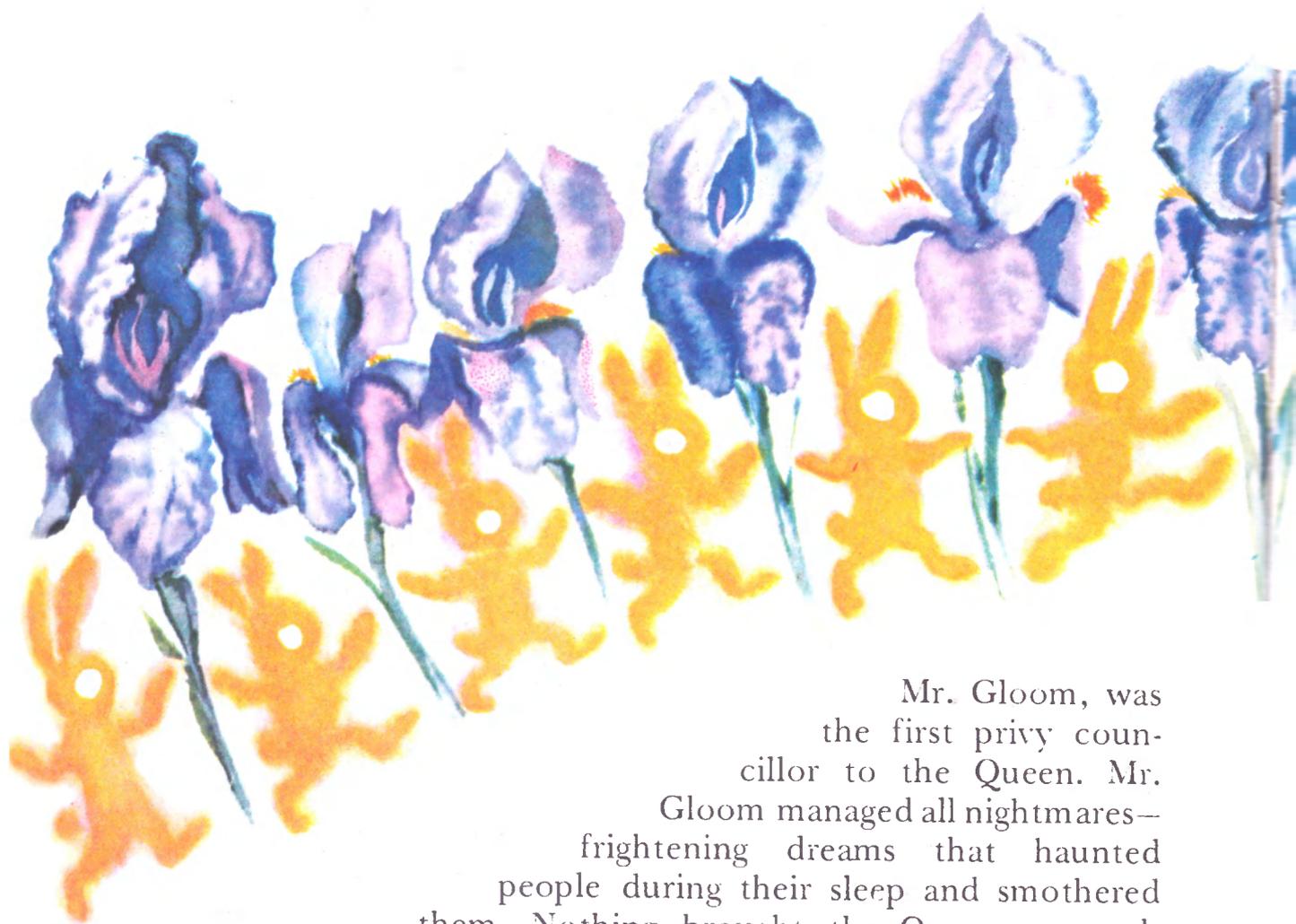
It's about time now to unravel the mystery and tell you one or two things about Mr. Gloom. As a matter of fact, he was none other than the Manager of the Office of Nightmares himself and the first privy councillor to the Queen of the Black Night.

Well, that doesn't tell you much, does it? Because you still don't know anything about the Queen of the Black Night. So listen. This kingdom, or perhaps we should say queendom really, lay deep, deep underground where eternal darkness reigned and no daylight ever penetrated. There lived the Queen in a huge, sumptuous palace. She had long black hair, a black face, and a black body. When the sun set and its last rays died, the Queen sent her subjects up to the earth. She hated people and tried to harm them as much

as possible. The cruel Hooliganians enjoyed her support too. Under the cover of night they plundered and murdered and the Queen rewarded them for it.

There was one place in the queendom without which the Queen would have been helpless. It was the Office of Nightmares. Its manager,





Mr. Gloom, was the first privy councillor to the Queen. Mr. Gloom managed all nightmares—frightening dreams that haunted people during their sleep and smothered them. Nothing brought the Queen so much joy and pleasure as the nightmares, and each one was her favourite.

The Queen of the Black Night was all-powerful. Nothing could overcome her except light. That was why her subjects slinked away at dawn, hiding away in the darkest nooks and crannies. And that was why her queendom lay deep in the ground. No living creature—neither man nor beast—could enter it. Only once, long, long ago, some overzealous mole came across the Queen's palace by chance when he was digging a burrow for himself. The Queen then ordered all moles to be blinded so they would never find the way to the queendom. From then on all moles have been blind.

The Sunbeam Bunnies were this cruel Queen's eternal and most deadly enemies, because they always tried to save people



from her and help them. The Queen hated the Sunbeam Bunnies and fought them in every way she could. But she failed every time. After all, the Sunbeam Bunnies visited the earth in the daytime, when the sun shone brightly and the Queen couldn't show her face. But in the daytime she was helped by her friends—the ferocious tribe of Thunderclouders and Thunderstormers, who were ruled by the arrogant and booming King Thunder and the scrawny and jaundiced-yellow Queen Thunderbolt. At their command the clouds blanketed the sky to cover up the sun, and thunderstorms whipped through the heavens. Thunder crashed, Thunderbolt flashed, the Thunderstormers pounced upon the earth in torrents, trying to destroy the Sunbeam Bunnies. But the Sunbeam Bunnies were invincible. They fought bravely and with the help of their good old friend Mr. Wind, scattered their enemies and chased them away, humiliated. Again the sky cleared, the sun smiled gently, and the Sunbeam Bunnies, each holding an iris in his teeth, joined

in a merry round dance, celebrating the victory. From a distance the dance of the Sunbeam Bunnies looked like a multi-coloured arch rising over the earth. People call it a rainbow and see it as a sign of something good. By the way, iris, in scientific language, means rainbow. So not for nothing has this flower been given such a name.

Hating the Sunbeam Bunnies as she did, the Queen of the Black Night waited for the best possible opportunity to take revenge on them.

One night, Mr. Gloom appeared before the Queen, and they talked for ten whole nights without leaving the palace. For ten nights people had sweet dreams and no nightmares because Mr. Gloom was busy.

No one, not even the Queen's closest servants knew what she and Mr. Gloom were discussing. Only on the tenth night did everyone find out that Mr. Gloom had thought up a fiendishly cunning and bold plan to destroy the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. But no one knew the details of this plan, it was top secret. Except for the Queen and Mr. Gloom of course. Mr. Gloom insisted on doing everything himself, because the matter called for the greatest caution and complete secrecy. The Manager of the Office of Nightmares decided he would enlist the help of the other dark forces of the queendom only as a last resort.

His main task was to get into the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. That was an extremely difficult thing to do. The path to the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies passed through a Magic Mirror. The mirror had the magic property of warding off everything evil, cruel and hostile. Even the sliest of the sly were powerless to deceive the Magic Mirror. No matter what kind and innocent faces they put on, once they looked into the mirror, their wickedness was revealed. It was impossible for them to get through the mirror.

But in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies there was a law: once every hundred years, a boy or girl no older than ten years could enter this land through the mirror and stay there as a guest for no more than one week. Within this week, this chosen person could,



if he or she wished, go home and then return to the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies again. But only those who had never done anything bad could get in there. Apart from that they had to have exactly 222 freckles on their faces. All this Mr. Gloom, using nightmares, wormed out of a feeble old woman of one hundred and nine who had been lucky enough to visit the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies in her childhood.

From then on, Mr. Gloom kept flying around the earth all year long, searching for such a boy or girl. He had been in many a country and bent over many a child's bed, looking intently into the faces of peacefully sleeping children.

In the end, he found such a child.

Of course, you must have guessed by now that it was Freckles.



7. THE LAND OF THE SUNBEAM BUNNIES

No sooner had Freckles thought about Mr. Gloom's intention of getting into the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies than a large owl with glinting green eyes suddenly came flying out of the darkness, followed by a number of bats. Mr. Gloom waved his cloak, and threw it off his shoulders. The owl and the bats snatched up the cloak and disappeared into the darkness. Frightened, Freckles started looking left and right searching for Mr. Gloom. But he had disappeared. The only thing he noticed was a shadow flitting from the cloak and darting into his jacket pocket. But he instantly forgot about it, as he did about Mr. Gloom. The only thing he saw in front of him was the strange mirror shining with a soft yellow light. Some unknown force attracted him to it. He walked up to the mirror. It glistened right before his eyes. Then a voice whispered: "Go, go on!" Obeying the voice, Freckles took a step and narrowed his eyes for fear that he'd hit the glass with his head. But nothing like that happened! He went through the mirror easily as though it were an open door. Moving his feet, he seemed to be flying effortlessly through the air. His body was light and weightless as in a dream. At first Freckles could not make out anything ahead. He moved on in a sort of yellow, golden mist.

Then the mist cleared gradually, and the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies spread out before him. The boy felt as though he had entered a huge, unusual flower garden.

Never before had he ever seen such a multitude of flowers. On earth, it would probably have been impossible, because the year's first gentle snowdrops grew next to such summer flowers as asters and chrysanthemums.



All the flowers of nature grew here at the same time: elegant proud irises; haughty daffodils and modest marigolds; dazzling blood-red cannas and plain homely primulas. Pansies peeped out from under luxurious peonies, while snapdragons stuck out their lips. The silvery bells of the lilies-of-the-valley trembled lightly in the breeze.

At first sight it looked as if the flowers grew haphazardly as in a forest or a field. But when Freckles looked closer he saw that they intertwined, forming unusual little houses with windows, doors, beautiful porches and verandahs.

In these houses of flowers the Sunbeam Bunnies lived.

Freckles stopped by the first house. Behind a low fence of daisies lay a flower garden. Its paths, sprinkled with yellow pollen, were bordered by rows of roses, gladioli, lilies and dahlias. Under them, like shrubs beneath trees, nestled nasturtiums, violets and snowdrops. In the depth of the garden, stood a house on the shore of a small mirrored lake with a water-lily arbour. Or, to be more precise, it didn't stand, it grew there. Actually, it was a big jasmine bush whose branches were interlaced in a fantastic pattern forming walls, windows, a roof and even a steeple with a white flower swaying on top of it. The windows had lacy curtains of lilies-of-the-valley, while marigolds served as windowsills. The verandah was made of cornflowers. In the middle of the verandah, an old Sunbeam Bunny was dozing in an armchair of plumose chrysanthemums. A lady Sunbeam Bunny in a white apron was sweeping the floor with a clover leaf.

Shouts and loud laughter echoed from the lake where naughty little Sunbeam Bunnies were skimming across the water on rose-petal boats.

Freckles stood there, hesitating. He wanted to call in at the house, but being a polite boy, he knew he couldn't do that without knocking first. But there was nothing to knock on. Then by the verandah he saw a forest bellflower with a cobweb stretching right up to the wicket. The boy pulled the thread gently. A pleasant

silvery ring sounded, and the four snapdragons that made up the wicket bent their heads to the ground, allowing the guest to pass through. The next moment he saw Mr. and Mrs. Sunbeam Bunnies hurrying to meet him with a welcoming smile. The little Sunbeam Bunnies, who came running from the lake, looked curiously at him from behind the flowers. The hosts didn't seem at all surprised by the boy's appearance and gave him a warm welcome. After all, anyone who had entered the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies could not possibly be an enemy, because the Magic Mirror would never have let him through. Therefore, he was a friend and a wanted guest.

The old Sunbeam Bunny was called Uncle Yas, and his wife's name was Auntie Tasia. Their little children did not as yet have names: there was a law in the land which said that the Sunbeam Bunnies could only have a name when they had become independent and started doing good works.

"Well, wife, we must lay the table," said Uncle Yas. "The first thing we should do is feed our guest."

Freckles did not turn down the invitation: firstly, because he didn't want to offend his hosts, and secondly, because he was very hungry. Sitting on a comfortable soft chrysanthemum, he dreamed of plenty of good food. But he was astonished when Auntie Tasia spread a napkin of water lily petals in front of everyone and set a bouquet of flowers on the table.

"Please, help yourself," she said.

Freckles blinked in confusion, because he couldn't see anything to eat. The hosts picked up a flower from the bouquet and started sniffing it, smacking their lips with delight. Freckles could do nothing but follow suit. He was even more surprised when he started to feel less hungry with every second.

As it turned out, the Sunbeam Bunnies fed themselves only on the perfume of flowers and anyone who finds himself in their land switches over to their diet.

It was an amazing dinner. Carnations for the first course,

jasmine for the second course, and sweet lungwort for the third.

Jasmine was Uncle Yas' favourite. He could smell ten flowers in a row without stopping. That's why he built himself a jasmine house.

After dinner Uncle Yas took Freckles round the garden. He showed him the various exotic flowers, telling him what they were distinctive for, when and where they grew on the earth, which human ailments they could cure, and so on. It was an extremely interesting tour, and Freckles was very enthusiastic.

On their way they came to a big flower-bed spreading over the centre of the garden. In the middle was a flower around which bearded, red-headed cannas, elegant irises, poppies and tulips grew in a tight circle like a guard of honour standing to attention. The thin-stemmed daffodils bent their proud heads before the flower in the middle. It was a little ordinary, yellow dandelion.

Yes, an ordinary, nondescript dandelion which one can find growing almost everywhere—in fields, forests, by the roadside, in streets, on the roofs of old houses, and even in town courtyards, emerging alongside grass between boulders. It was the kind of dandelion that people don't usually notice and which they trample underfoot. Yet here it held pride of place.

Freckles asked why.

And this is what he heard.

Dandelions were the favourite flowers of the Sunbeam Bunnies. You must have noticed that they look like the sun—round, dazzling yellow, with petals just like sunrays.

Every year, in early spring, all the Sunbeam Bunnies come flying down to earth. And if people had magic vision, they'd see how the Sunbeam Bunnies open the tight dandelion buds with their paws, and instantly a multitude of yellow suns flash out amid the green sea of grass. Those are dandelions breaking into bloom.



People consider snowdrops, pasque flowers, and violets to be the first flowers of spring. That is true—they do appear earlier than dandelions. But when dandelions bloom, the sun already shines really warm and bright, and the trees turn green all over. Only then is spring in full swing.

Dandelions are the most long-lasting of all spring flowers. Long after snowdrops, pasque flowers and violets have wilted and people forget their scent till next spring, and after orchards

shed their blossoms and wild strawberries appear in the woods, dandelions are still yellow in the grass and children still weave them into rings. Dandelions bloom in the grass right up till autumn.

They bloom only when the sun shines. When it slips down behind the horizon and night sets in, dandelions fold their petals and close up right away just like an umbrella. They only open again with the first morning sunrays.

Dandelions are true friends of the Sunbeam Bunnies. They always warn the Sunbeam Bunnies of any danger. Before a thunderstorm, that is when the Thunderclouders and Thunderstormers gather in the sky, dandelions also fold up their petals. So this is a sign for the Sunbeam Bunnies—get ready for battle.

There is yet another feature peculiar to dandelions: they do not wilt like all the other flowers, but grow old and pass away just like people do. When their time comes, the yellow heads turn grey with white fluffy hair. The wind tears it off and scatters it all over the earth. Sometimes children help Mr. Wind in his work. They blow off the grey dandelion heads for the fun of it, and dandelions die wordlessly and meekly. Their grey hair falls to the ground, and from it the flowers grow again.

All this happens because dandelions are not ordinary, but magic flowers. On the earth they are grown by the Sunbeam Bunnies.

That is why children love dandelions perhaps more than any other flowers.

Freckles looked respectfully at the dandelion: what a remarkable flower it was!

“Well, now I’ll take you to the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales,” Uncle Yas said. “I think you’ll find it interesting. Oh yes, and we’ll also drop in to the Palace



of Laughter on the way.”

They walked down wide streets which looked more like paths in a huge blossoming garden. The Sunbeam Bunnies they met on their way greeted Freckles in a friendly way: whoever entered the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies was immediately accepted as a friend. Being a polite boy Freckles answered every greeting. Shortly afterwards, they reached the Palace of Laughter. It was made completely of distorted mirrors. Inside, Freckles laughed till he hiccuped, looking at his reflections.

By the way, the Palace of Laughter was a medical centre. The Sunbeam Bunnies considered laughter to be the best medicine against each and every ailment, and prescribed sessions of five, ten, and even twenty minutes of laughter three times a day, or however long anyone needed it for a cure. Since the Sunbeam Bunnies never seemed to fall ill, the Palace of Laughter was used by the inhabitants of the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales for treatment.

Well, everything good is only good in correct amounts. So after half an hour, Uncle Yas took Freckles away from the palace, saying that so much unaccustomed laughter might even prove harmful.





8. IN THE CASTLE OF MAGIC FAIRY TALES

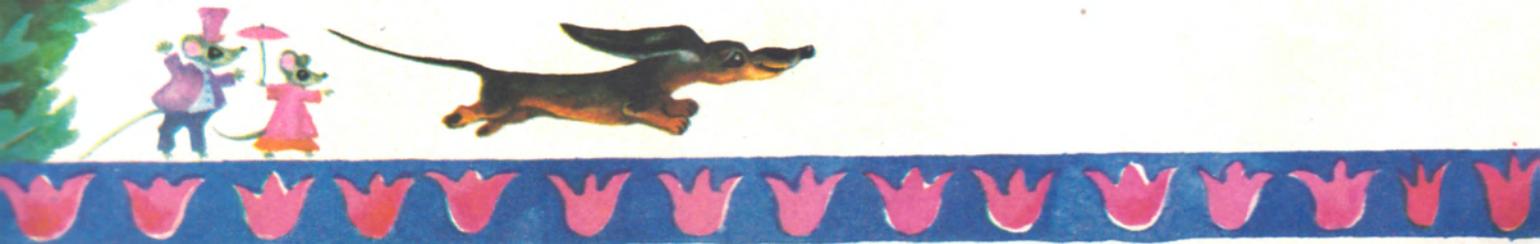
Not far away from the Palace of Laughter a castle towered. Its battlement walls were ornamented with a lot of different figures. Baba Yaga the Witch was sitting in a mortar at the very top of a tower, and slithering from her feet down the wall was Gorinich the Dragon. The Blue Beard lurked in one corner of the castle, and vines clambered up his back. Koshchei the Deathless supported a balcony with his head. Mermaids lounged around on its banisters. The windows of the castle were shaped like the huge eyes of a hundred-headed dragon. Owls and bats with spread wings stood on the windowsills. On either side of the entrance sat grey wolves with bared fangs, while the entrance itself resembled the opened jaws of some incredible-looking monster.

But Freckles wasn't at all afraid, because it was immediately obvious that all the figures were made of stone.

So this was the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales.

The boy entered it and immediately felt at home, because he saw so many acquaintances. Here lived the heroes of every fairy tale in the world. Inside, the castle wasn't at all frightening, on the contrary, it was bright, spacious, and sunlit. Good fairies and enchantresses were sitting by the windows in soft, comfortable armchairs and embroidered marvellous little cushions—just like ordinary grannies do.

In a corner, the Old Genie Hottabych and Baron Münchhausen were playing chess. Out of habit, Baron Münchhausen was telling all sorts of cock-and-bull stories, while the Old Genie Hottabych listened attentively, nodding his head—of all people, he couldn't be surprised by anything.



Aladdin was sitting at a table, cleaning the magic lamp with chalk. On the balcony the Old Fisherman and his wife sat by their broken wash-tub. The Old Fisherman fed the Golden Fish swimming in an aquarium.

Puss in Boots was lying stretched out on a windowsill, sunning himself. Excited cries could be heard from the yard where the Thirty-Three Knights played football, their chief Chernomor acting as referee. Right there on the sports ground, Katigoroshek Rollipea was wrestling with Aliosha Popovich on a mat, and Ilya Muromets and Dobrinia Nikitich were lifting dumb-bells. Behind the sports ground, in a garden, the Ugly Duckling, the Speckled Hen, the Golden Cockerel, Brother Hare and other heroes from fairy tales about animals were walking around. Princes and princesses, kings and queens walked around like ordinary mortals, not displaying their superiority in the least. Here, in the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales, everyone was equal.

After looking around the whole castle, Freckles visited the children's room. Actually it wasn't a room at all, but a big hall with a glass ceiling. It was a noisy and merry place just like a kindergarten. Pinocchio, Tom Thumb, Ivasik Telesik, the staunch Tin Soldier, and Cipollino were playing an interesting game which looked like "border guards and spies". Little Red Riding Hood, Alionushka, the Snow Maiden and some other girls were playing with dolls. Petrushka was conjuring up funny tricks for Murzilka. Periwinkle was riding around on a grasshopper like on a horse, while Dunno, Twistum, Bendum and the other small fry were doing their homework.

Freckles was surprised: did fairy-tale heroes study at school too? Apparently so—there was a special school for fairy-tale children at the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. Here they were taught what to do under various fairy-tale circumstances. Ilya Muromets and Katigoroshek Rollipea taught them how to be strong and brave. Ivan the Fool was a



teacher in intelligence and quick-wittedness. Kindness was taught by the old fairy godmother from the fairy tale *Cinderella*. While Cinderella herself showed the fairy-tale girls how to keep house. Gymnast Tibul from the fairy tale about the three fat men held classes in PT.

There were a lot of other subjects which the little fairy-tale heroes had to learn. And it must be said that they were excellent students. Not one of them ever received bad marks.

Freckles noticed that time and again some of them disappeared and then returned again. They flew away to take part in a fairy tale which some granny was reading to her grandchild at that time. When the fairy tale ended, they came back.

Freckles walked through the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales for ages but never once did he meet a wicked magician, devil, witch or anyone like that. Only kind heroes lived in the castle. The boy asked Uncle Yas how could it be.

And that's what he was told.

As it turned out, the Sunbeam Bunnies had destroyed all the ogres, wicked magicians, devils and witches on earth a long time ago. There were only a few left for the fairy tales. So that even the last remaining few could not do any harm, the Sunbeam Bunnies had locked them in a dungeon under the Castle of the Magic Fairy Tales, where they sat behind bars: one witch, one devil, one wood-goblin and so on—in a word, only one evil spirit of each kind.

When any of them had to take part in a fairy tale, the Sunbeam Bunnies took them to the earth under guard. When the fairy tale ended, they were brought back the same way. So it was absolutely impossible for any devil, wood-goblin or witch to roam around the world scot-free. They could only be met in fairy tales now.

All these impressions made Freckles' head spin. Now just try and visit all the fairy-tale heroes at the same time!



9. THE SECRET OF THE VALLEY OF SWEET DREAMS

When they left the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales, Uncle Yas said:

“Well now, let’s go home. You should have been asleep a long time ago. On earth, the night is already drawing in. Soon it’ll be morning, and you haven’t had a wink of sleep. And we the Sunbeam Bunnies must hurry to the earth. Look, the sun’s rising.”

Uncle Yas pointed to a big, beautiful sunflower growing nearby.

At first Freckles didn’t understand what the sunflower had to do with it all.

So Uncle Yas explained it to him. The sunflower was a sacred flower for the Sunbeam Bunnies and a king of all the sunny flowers in the world. In the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies it served as a clock. It always looks at the sun, and when the sun drifts across the heavens, its head follows the sun. Looking at the sunflower, the Sunbeam Bunnies know exactly when they have to be on earth, so they are never late.

The Sunbeam Bunnies were already scampering down the



street, anxious not to be late for dawn. There were so many of them that Freckles was dazzled.

Suddenly, one of them stopped next to Freckle and exclaimed:

“Oh, I know you. You were in the forest that day! ”

Freckles stood rooted to the spot. So that’s who had saved him from the Hooliganians. Freckles wanted to ask his name and thank him for the rescue, but the Sunbeam Bunny had already disappeared without trace. The modest Sunbeam Bunnies were not used to being thanked. They simply did their good deeds.

Uncle Yas took Freckles into his jasmine home and put him to bed which was made of the softest peonies.

“But how could such a big human boy sleep on flowers?” you might ask. “Why, he might break and crush them.”

Not at all. He who enters the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies becomes, firstly, just as small as the Sunbeam Bunnies themselves, and secondly, just as light and weightless as they—in general, a little, fairytale human.

Well, I must apologise for not having told you about that earlier.

Uncle Yas hurried off to catch up with the Sunbeam Bunnies, while Freckles immediately sank into a heavy sleep as soon as he lay down on the bed, and slept all day right up until evening.

When Freckles opened his eyes, Uncle Yas was already back home.

Although it was sunny and just as wonderful as before, Freckles awoke with a heavy heart. He had had a bad dream, but couldn’t remember what it was about. That often happens with us, we forget what we’ve been dreaming about. However hard he tried to remember he found that he couldn’t.

There was only one thing Freckles remembered about his dream: whatever happened, he had to leave the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies straightaway and go somewhere. Yet he didn’t really want to go: it was shame to part with the Land of the Sunbeam



Bunnies so soon. Understandably, Freckles was in a dreadfully bad mood.

Uncle Yas noticed that immediately. Up till then no one in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies had ever been in a bad mood.

“What’s the matter, Freckles?” Uncle Yas asked, alarmed.

“Well, I dreamt that I had to leave your land.”

“Why? What for?”

“I don’t know myself. For the life of me I can’t remember what I had dreamt about. I just feel I have to go at all costs.”

“Oh no, that can’t be done that way. We have to investigate the dream.”

“That’s easier said than done! How can it be done, when I can’t remember anything?”

“Oh, that can be remedied. Let’s go.”

Uncle Yas took Freckles through the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies again, past the houses of flowers, the blue mirrored lakes, and wonderful flower gardens. They walked on and on and at last

came to a boundless sunlit valley.

“Before you lies the Valley of Sweet Dreams,” Uncle Yas said. “Now look for your dream here.”

Freckles froze in amazement. The whole valley was overgrown with lilac-coloured flowers rather like tulips, but their petals were covered with gentle, velvety hair. Those were pasque flowers. In some parts of the earth they are called “dream flowers”.

A sweet dream lives in each flower. Whenever the dream leaves the flower to appear in somebody’s sleep, the flower closes and drops its head.

At night the Valley of Sweet Dreams is empty: all the dreams are scattered around the world. Only here and there stand some flowers with open petals. That means somebody isn’t asleep. Sometimes a dream might fly away during the day when someone is asleep. Such dreams are usually intended for children who sleep after midday.

The daytime dreams are carried all over the earth by the Sunbeam Bunnies. But they cannot spread the night dreams, because they do not visit the earth at night. The night dreams are handled by the cousins of the Sunbeam Bunnies—the Moonbeam Bunnies. Oh yes, there are such. Whereas the Sunbeam Bunnies are children of the Sun, the Moonbeam Bunnies are children of the Moon.

The Moon is in actual fact the Sun’s younger sister. The Sunbeam Bunnies, as you know by now, visit the earth only during the day, and disappear at night, whereas the Moonbeam Bunnies appear only at night when the moon shines. In the morning they hide in their Land of the Moonbeam Bunnies which is also behind the Magic Mirror, but in a different place altogether.

The Sunbeam and the Moonbeam Bunnies are great friends and help one another out. Sometimes the Moonbeam Bunnies visit their cousins during the daytime. So if you ever see the Moon in the sky in daytime, it means that the moon has taken its Moonbeam Bunnies to visit the Sunbeam Bunnies.

But let us return to the Valley of Sweet Dreams.

Freckles walked slowly through the valley, bending down and looking into the open petals from time to time. As soon as he looked inside, he saw a vivid picture of a daydream.

Freckles came across many dreams of boys and girls, men and women he didn't know. They were dreams about tricycles, big talking dolls, mountains of chocolate sweets, or adventures on distant planets, travels, and a lot of other things like that.

Accidentally, he came across Grandad Wizard's dream. Remember the old hunter told Freckles one evening about the amazing adventures the boy would have. Grandad Wizard was right. Freckles saw, down to the minutest detail, everything that had happened to him: his adventures at the colony, his journey to the Magic Mirror, and everything he had seen in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. The dream broke off when Freckles was walking through the Valley of Sweet Dreams, that is, just at the moment he was now. But what would happen next? You see, Grandad Wizard's dream broke off just at that point.

Willy-nilly, but such was the law of the Valley of Sweet Dreams. Here you couldn't know the future: it remained a mystery.

Freckles remembered Grandad Wizard with tenderness. What was he doing right now? How were they all faring in the colony? Oh, if only the old hunter's prophecy would come true as soon as possible!

But Freckles would not let himself be carried away, because he had to look for his own dream.

He had been walking through the Valley of Sweet Dreams for a long time, when he looked into a flower and lo and behold! there was his dream. Freckles recalled it immediately. The first thing that resurfaced in his memory was the horrible Mr. Gloom, for the dream was actually about him.

Here is what he learned from that dream.

Mr. Gloom was scheming to destroy the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. The only way he could do it was to smash the Magic Mirror and there was only one fairy-tale character who could do

it—the Troll from Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, because only he had experience of something like that.

Remember how his pupils broke the mirror and the glass splinters scattered all over the world and did such a lot of harm?

The Troll had long been confined in the dungeon under the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. The Sunbeam Bunnies kept a close watch over him. Very rarely did they take him out to take part in fairy tales and then only under guard.

Mr. Gloom's plan was to free the Troll. That was why he hid in Freckles' pocket. He wanted to get into the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. Mr. Gloom was made of darkness so he could shrink to the tiniest size and hide in any little nook or cranny.

Yet without his magic cloak—and you must have guessed that it was not a simple cloak but a magic one—Mr. Gloom had no might or power. Hiding in Freckles' pocket, he could see, hear and understand everything, but he could not do anything. To tell the truth, this was all he wanted at first, because Mr. Gloom's first plan was to find out where the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales was. Only then could he think about how to get into the dungeon.

So freeing the Troll without the magic cloak was out of the question. Mr. Gloom didn't dare stick his nose out into the open (don't forget he was made of darkness), because the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies was always so bright and sunny that any darkness in it instantly scattered and disappeared in the light.

Somebody had to bring Mr. Gloom's cloak into the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. Only Freckles could do this, no one else. Using his power over dreams, Mr. Gloom penetrated Freckles' bright, sweet dream and impressed this cruel thought into the boy.

Freckles told Uncle Yas everything immediately.

Uncle Yas became seriously alarmed upon hearing it: "What?! Mr. Gloom in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies! We must call a council immediately."

Uncle Yas ran up to a little root sticking out of the ground,

pulled it, and the bluebells at each flower house rang throughout the entire land. Immediately, the Sunbeam Bunnies came running from everywhere to the Valley of Sweet Dreams. Soon they filled the entire valley. When all had assembled, Uncle Yas climbed onto a sunflower platform, and said:

“Brothers! Mr. Gloom has sneaked into our land. He wants to free the Troll from the dungeon at the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales, and use him to shatter the Magic Mirror, and thus destroy our land. We must take urgent measures. As you know, we have a boy here, a guest from Freckleland. Mr. Gloom came through the Magic Mirror in the pocket of this boy’s jacket. But, of course, he couldn’t smuggle in his black cloak. So now this crafty gentleman wants to make Freckles bring him his cloak. What shall we do?”

You would think that such a huge audience would react to Uncle Yas’ words with an unbelievable hullabaloo. No at all! The Sunbeam Bunnies were extremely disciplined. A silence fell. The Sunbeam Bunnies were thinking, their ears lying flat on their backs, as a matter of fact. Presently, one of them in the back rows pricked up his ears, which meant he asked permission to speak. Uncle Yas said right away:

“Speak, please, Brother Lel! ”

In one bound Brother Lel was on the sunflower, standing beside Uncle Yas.

“I don’t think we should do anything yet,” he suggested. “Let Freckles go and fetch the cloak. By the time he’s back, we’ll have thought of something.”

Uncle Yas gave the speaker a sidelong glance. This didn’t mean distrust at all for Uncle Yas couldn’t look any other way. Like all bunnies, he was naturally cross-eyed. On the contrary, Uncle Yas accepted Brother Lel’s suggestion with approval:

“I think Brother Lel is right: that’s the best way out so far.”

But Freckles was not convinced by Brother Lel’s speech. Since it concerned Freckles in the first place, he was bold enough to express his doubts:

“Dear brother Sunbeam Bunnies, I’m not against bringing the cloak, so please, don’t think I’m afraid. Not even a little bit. But I think it’s risky having the cloak here. That’s exactly what Mr. Gloom wants. He’ll put on the cloak, become invincible, free the Troll, and the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies may be destroyed. Wouldn’t it be much simpler for me to leave and never return? Without me Mr. Gloom won’t be able to get through the Magic Mirror, and you’ll be saved. Or better still: let’s destroy my jacket along with Mr. Gloom. Burn it, and that’ll be the end of it. I won’t be sorry in the least. Please.”

The Sunbeam Bunnies listened to him attentively, admiring his courage, but they turned down his suggestion straightaway.

Firstly, it was impossible to destroy the jacket. He who entered the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies via the Magic Mirror was inviolable and so were his belongings. Such was the sacred law of this land.

Secondly, Freckles’ suggestion to leave along with Mr. Gloom and never to return would also come to nothing. In this case, Mr. Gloom would remain safe and sound and continue his vile acts. That could not be allowed. The Sunbeam Bunnies had long dreamed of seizing Mr. Gloom, incarcerating him in the dungeon at the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales, and thus help the Frecklelanders. That’s exactly what could be done now. But for this to happen, Mr. Gloom had to be allowed to put on his cloak. Without the cloak he was difficult to catch, powerless though he was now.

Then a new thought flashed across Freckles’ mind:

“Wait a minute, he can hear everything we are saying. So he just won’t stay here any longer and will sneak out along with me.”

“Don’t worry about that, he won’t,” Uncle Yas put Freckles at ease. “He knows very well that he won’t be able to get into our land a second time. That’s why he’ll stay for sure. Besides, this self-conceited villain is convinced that he’ll overcome us.”

Freckles could not but agree with these irrefutable arguments. Uncle Yas then addressed the Sunbeam Bunnies:

“Well, brothers, who’s in favour of Brother Lel’s proposition, please vote.”

They all pricked up their ears.

“Unanimous! ” said Uncle Yas. “You may go.”

The Valley of Sweet Dreams emptied in a flash as the Sunbeam Bunnies ran off to their homes.

Freckles looked respectfully at Uncle Yas. He must be the chief here, Freckles thought. See, how everyone obeyed him!

But Freckles was wrong. Uncle Yas was just an ordinary Sunbeam Bunny. In this land there were no superiors or subordinates. All Sunbeam Bunnies were equal. Anyone who had to solve a problem could call the Grand Sunny Council. And that’s just what had happened—the Grand Sunny Council! He who called it had to act as chairman.

All important questions were always solved by the Sunbeam Bunnies together at the Grand Council.



10. BROTHER CHIK

Without wasting time, Freckles started to prepare for his journey. He took off his jacket and hung it on a twig in the jasmine home of Uncle Yas. In his jacket pocket was Mr. Gloom, and if he wanted, he could climb out, get under Freckles' armpit or in his ear, and thus escape from the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. But Uncle Yas was right: Mr. Gloom did not intend to leave the sunny land. He planned to carry through his vile scheme to the end.

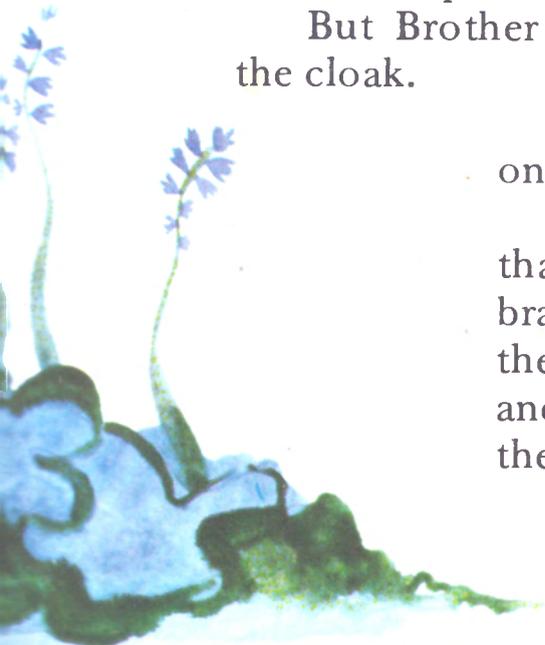
Uncle Yas accompanied Freckles to the Magic Mirror. The boy found himself again in a dense yellow mist.

Uncle Yas had told Freckles that on the other side of the mirror, at the entrance to the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies, the Moonbeam Brother Chik would be waiting to show him the way there. It would be a long, hard trek. The owl and the bats had carried Mr. Gloom's cloak into a thick forest and put it on a high tree, amid dense mistletoe twigs.

But Brother Chik had seen it and so knew how to get the cloak.

A mistletoe is a parasitic plant. It grows on trees and sucks all the juices out of them.

Maybe you have seen green dense caps that look like birds' nests on some tree branches. In summertime they are hidden by the leaves and are barely visible, yet in autumn and winter after the trees shed their leaves, they can be seen quite clearly. That's mistletoe.





People sometimes call it the “Witch’s Broom”. And rightly so, because it is really a devilish plant where the subjects of the Queen of the Black Night nest. Often it is also a sleeping place for nightmares and bad dreams. Small wonder Mr. Gloom’s cloak was hidden there.

Freckles picked his way through the yellow mist. After another step, darkness enveloped him abruptly: he had passed through the Magic Mirror. It was night on the earth. After the bright light of the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies, the darkness blinded Freckles for a moment.

When his eyes grew used to the darkness, he saw that he was again standing on the shores of the lake. If he hadn’t known it, he would have never believed that this lake with its rolling waves could turn into a magic mirror, and that behind it lay the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies.

Freckles looked round, his eyes searching for Chik, and soon spotted him. Brother Chik sat on a stone and wiggled his ears. It was the first time Freckles had ever seen a Moonbeam Bunny, so he regarded him with interest. He looked exactly like a Sunbeam



Bunny, except that he was made of moonbeams and therefore silvery white, rather than yellow.

Freckles and Brother Chik introduced themselves to each other.

They set out on their really difficult trip. It was one thing to fly like an arrow through the sky in Mr. Gloom's arms, and quite another walking across mountains, ravines and gorges. In front, the Moonbeam Bunny slid over the ground easily and noiselessly while Freckles, tripping and grazing his knees, dragged himself along behind him with difficulty.

It was long past midnight when they passed through the mountains and entered a deep forest. The huge ancient trees stood in gloomy silence. A mysterious rustle, wary footsteps, and the light snapping of twigs echoed from the forest. Those were the nightly beasts of prey on their prowl for game. Somewhere from the distant depths came the hoots of an owl that sounded like the heart-rending cry of a sick child.

Freckles became frightened.

If it hadn't been for the Moonbeam Bunny disappearing and

reappearing here and there as he gleamed between the twigs, Freckles would have probably lost his head in these impenetrable thickets haunted by sinister shadows.

The boy had grown thoroughly tired. Once they reached a small moonlit glade, he sank onto the grass, exhausted.

“Oh, I can’t go on any more! ” he said. “Let’s rest! ”

“All right, let’s have a rest,” Brother Chik agreed, making himself as comfortable as possible on a fern leaf.

Next to Freckles grew a low shrub covered with large red berries. They looked so attractive that Freckles, who was also hungry by then, couldn’t resist them. He plucked some berries off the shrub, and was about to pop them in his mouth when Brother Chik jumped up from his fern leaf and shouted:

“Don’t eat them! Throw them away! Throw them away immediately! ”

Freckles reluctantly obeyed.

“Do you know what that is?” Brother Chik asked. “It’s spurge laurel. You could have poisoned yourself and died. They’re specially grown on earth by the Queen of the Black Night. In the summer the shrub bursts into beautiful purple flowers that look like lilac. But that’s a trap. The smell of the flowers is poisonous. They’re grown to poison us, the Moonbeam and Sunbeam Bunnies. The Queen knows exactly what we feed on. But we exposed the secret long ago and so we keep away from the flowers. You, too, beware of them, especially of the berries.”

After what the Moonbeam Bunny had said, the red berries seemed repulsive to Freckles as though they were filled with blood. He picked all the berries from the bush and trampled on every one in case anyone ate them by accident.

Freckles even felt disgusted by the thought of staying on in that glade.

“Right, I’ve had enough rest,” he told Brother Chik. “Let’s move on.”

They set off again. Soon the friends came to a little forest

stream, overgrown with reeds and water plants.

“Wait here while I go and look for a ford, because you might drown,” said Brother Chik.

He slid across the reeds and disappeared into the water without making even a ripple.

Freckles bent over the water and saw Brother Chik walking down the stream bed without any fuss and bother. As it turned out, the Moonbeam Bunnies could penetrate everything transparent—water, ice, glass. Only opaque objects could block their way, but the Moonbeam Bunnies easily passed them or jumped over them.

Some minutes later, Brother Chik reappeared.

“Let’s go! ” he said and led Freckles across the ford.



11. ENCOUNTER WITH OLD ACQUAINTANCES

After crossing the river, Freckles saw a sad picture. Limp twigs broken by some cruel hand hung down the trees; the bark was cut up by knives and covered with all sorts of doodles and silly graffiti. A destroyed bird's nest lay on the ground. And a skull with a knife clutched in its teeth—the coat of arms of the Hooliganians—was burned onto the bark of an old birch tree.

Freckles realized who had been here.

Dawn was breaking: the birds, invisible in the foliage, started twittering, a tireless woodpecker hammered away against the bark, and an oriole moaned and wailed in the distance.

“Oh, I won't make it,” Brother Chik said with a sigh. “Day is dawning, and my time is running out. Never mind, see the hollow in that old oak tree over there? Climb inside, have a good rest and some sleep, and I'll be back in the evening and we'll continue our journey. By the way, there are nuts in that hollow. Eat them, because you are hungry. The hollow belongs to Squirrel Vivera who has a storehouse there. She's a good friend of mine, so she won't mind. You'll be safe in the hollow. But don't you look out because the Hooliganians are around somewhere nearby. They'll nab you as soon as they see you. Well, so long till evening!”

Brother Chik started to fade into the distance, and soon disappeared.

Freckles climbed into the hollow. It was warm, cosy and rather spacious there. In a corner was a heap of tasty nuts and pine cones. The first thing Freckles did, of course, was eat his fill of nuts, and then he



made himself as comfortable as possible under the circumstances and drifted off into slumber.

Freckles was roused from sleep by voices. It was midday, but outside the sky was gloomy and overcast. The whole sky was covered with clouds.

Under the oak tree someone was talking loudly. The voices were rough and unpleasant, but to Freckles they had a familiar ring about them. He couldn't control himself and peeped out of the hollow. And what do you think he saw? Under the oak stood his old acquaintances: Bill Rascal, John Deebull and Tom Spider. Deebull's hairy paw held a bunny—not a Moonbeam or Sunbeam Bunny, but an ordinary grey bunny. He was pulling its ears, saying again and again:

“Dance! Dance! Do as I tell you! ”

But the bunny did not want to dance and only glanced at his tormentors with eyes full of hatred. See, and they say that all bunnies are cowards!

“You don't want to dance, do you? So I'll kill you right away! ” Deebull hollered and pulled a long sharp knife from his belt.

Bill Rascal and Tom Spider broke into wild laughter.

Freckles forgot about caution and about everything in the world for that matter. He couldn't bear to see a defenceless brave soul being killed. The boy picked up a big cone and hurled it at Deebull with all his might. The cone hit Deebull right on the nose. The Hooliganian screamed with pain and let go of his victim. The bunny scampered off into the shrubs and that was the last the Hooliganians saw of him.

“There he is, there in the hollow! ” Bill Rascal yelled.

Although Bill Rascal had only one eye, it was terribly alert and saw everything in the world.

“Who's there, who?” Tom Spider screeched.

“Some boy! ” Bill Rascal answered. “I saw him. Some no good kid! ”

“Now just you wait, we'll soon make short work of you! ”

John Deebull howled, his face still distorted with pain. "Climb the tree, Tom Spider! "

Hugging the tree with his long arms, Tom Spider clambered up to the hollow. Freckles realized that things were going badly for him. But the boy decided that he would not lose his life without making them suffer too. He picked up the nuts and cones and started throwing them at the enemy. The cones rained down like hail, while the nuts broke on the Hooliganians' heads. Hollering and swearing, Tom Spider fell to the ground; Bill Rascal and John Deebull went down, covering their heads with their hands.

But even though the supply of cones and nuts in the hollow was large, it soon came to an end. Don't forget, Freckles was only a small boy, while the Hooliganians were huge, strong men. When Freckles hadn't anything left to defend himself with, Tom Spider climbed up the tree, grabbed Freckles with his bony hand, and pulled him out of the hollow by the scruff of the neck.

"Hey, this is the same kid who ran away from us! " Bill Rascal howled.

"It's because of him that we lost our way and almost died! " Tom Spider shrieked. "Oh my, am I mad at him! We must tear him to pieces right away."

"No, that's not enough," John Deebull growled. "I suffered the most. Oh my poor nose! I'm afraid I won't be able to sniff tobacco any more. No, we must think up such a punishment for that imp that he'll remember it for the rest of his days. We'll shut him up in the Cave of Thirty-Three Troubles, and he'll stay there until we decide what to do with him next."

John Deebull's idea met with a roar of approval. The Hooliganians tied Freckles up, shoved him into a huge sack, and carried it off somewhere.



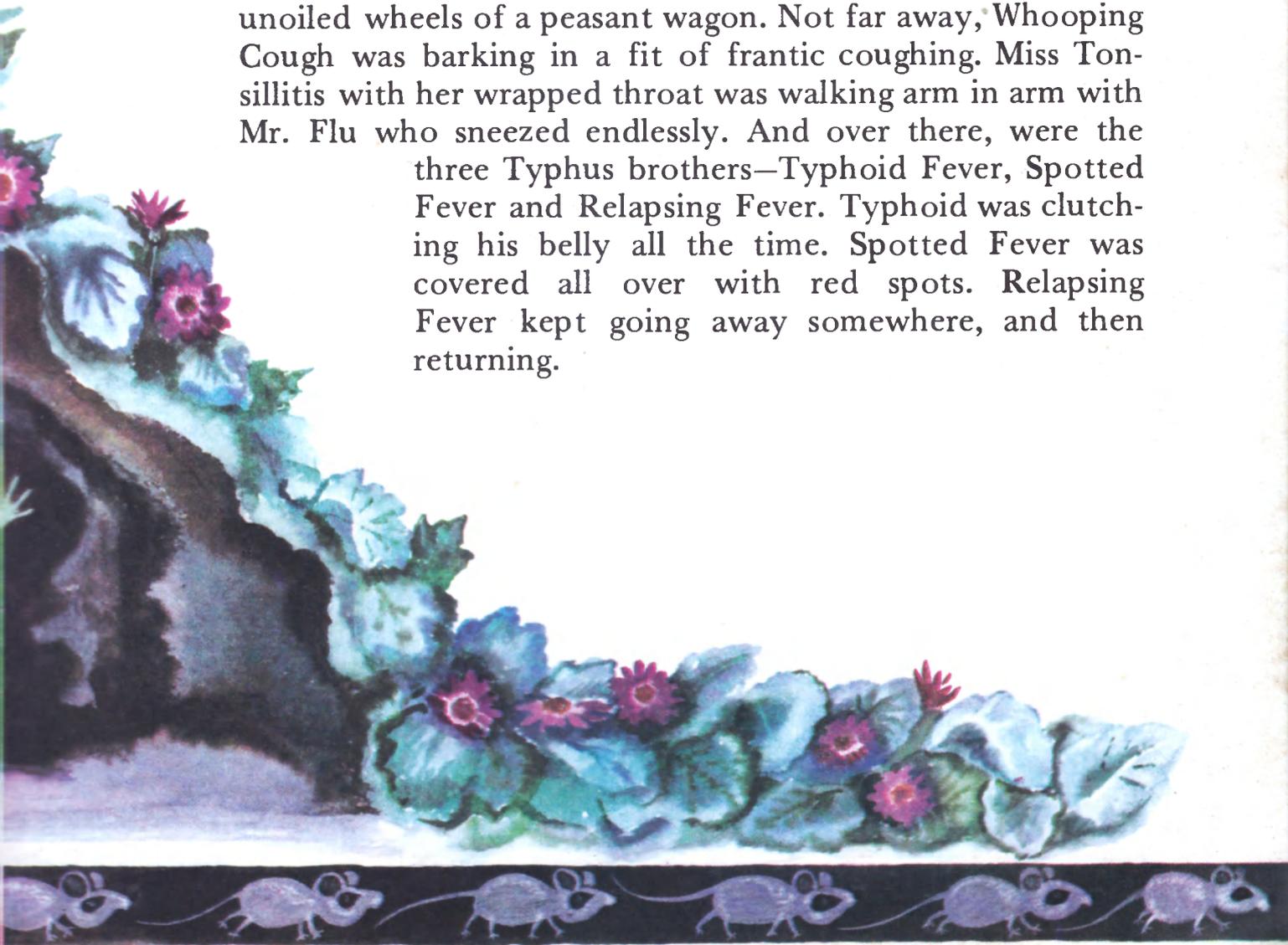


12. THE CAVE OF THIRTY-THREE TROUBLES

Some time later, Freckles felt he was being shaken out of the sack. He fell out and rolled down some cold wet steps. A heavy door banged shut, and a lock clicked.

Freckles saw he was in an enormous, frightful cavern. A dim green light gleamed from its high ceiling. Some figures moved about the cave. Freckles looked closer and trembled with fright. Yes, it was not called the Cave of Thirty-Three Troubles for nothing. Here all the ailments and diseases in the world had made their home.

Over there, the hideous Madame Scarlet Fever, her skin hanging down her body in shreds, passed by with unsteady tread. Behind her staggered the shivering Mrs. Malaria. Next to her stalked Mr. Rheumatism, his bones creaking like the unoiled wheels of a peasant wagon. Not far away, Whooping Cough was barking in a fit of frantic coughing. Miss Tonsillitis with her wrapped throat was walking arm in arm with Mr. Flu who sneezed endlessly. And over there, were the three Typhus brothers—Typhoid Fever, Spotted Fever and Relapsing Fever. Typhoid was clutching his belly all the time. Spotted Fever was covered all over with red spots. Relapsing Fever kept going away somewhere, and then returning.



All in all, the cave was swarming with all sorts of diseases. Freckles was afraid to move. He had a feeling they were all going to pounce on him now. Of course, he, like all boys and girls in the world, didn't want to land up in bed ill.

But so far the diseases hadn't paid him any attention. They simply hadn't noticed him. All around there was such an unbelievable pandemonium of coughing, moaning and howling that no one seemed to have heard the door creak open when the Hooliganians threw Freckles into the cave.

The boy started cautiously inching toward the door. He knew it was closed, but even so it seemed safer to him.

Slowly climbing step by step, Freckles went up the slippery stone stairway. At last he was by the thick oak door. He tried to push it with his shoulder. Nothing doing! The door was shut by a large iron bolt from the outside. Even the strongest man couldn't have broken it down. Sad thoughts overwhelmed Freckles. It was stupid for this to happen! It was in Mr. Gloom's interests to have Freckles bring the magic cloak as soon as possible, while Mr. Gloom's best friends, the Hooliganians, were the very ones who were stopping Freckles from doing it and even wanted to destroy him too. On the other hand, the Hooliganians didn't know anything about it. After all, Mr. Gloom was still in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies, and he didn't tell anyone about his secret scheme. So no one could save Freckles. Not even the Sunbeam Bunnies! The whole sky was overcast and the sun had disappeared. Oh, what a mess he was in! What would he do now?

That instant Freckles saw with horror that the diseases had noticed him. Hissing venomously and pushing one another, they moved up the stairway. The disgusting Mr. Flu led the gang.

Freckles shut his eyes and hid his face in his hands. He felt his temperature rising and a cold entering his head. Now he would be ill!

Suddenly he heard terrible screams. Freckles felt his tempera-

ture dropping back to normal and his cold disappear. When he opened his eyes, he saw the clamouring diseases tumbling down the steps, and right by his side were the Sunbeam Bunnies. Freckles realized at once why the diseases were running away. They all were terrified of the sun and, naturally, of the Sunbeam Bunnies. Freckles recognized Uncle Yas and Brother Lel and his other friends. There were about ten of them in all. With tears in his eyes the boy thanked them for saving him.

It turned out that the Sunbeam Bunnies had broken through the defences of the Thunderclouders and Thunderstormers they had been fighting and rushed to earth to help Freckles. They knew the boy was in trouble. Squirrel Vivera told them about it, since she was sitting on a twig watching when the Hooliganians seized Freckles. Although she regretted losing her stores, she was glad that the Hooliganians received their true deserts. With all her heart she wanted to save the brave boy.

The Sunbeam Bunnies had arrived just in time. Freckles wasn't afraid of the diseases any more.

But how could he get out of the cave? The Sunbeam Bunnies had entered it through a little crack in the door. There was no way Freckles could get through that crack. He couldn't even stick his finger in it.

"Don't worry," Brother Lel comforted Freckles. "The Hooliganians will let you out themselves. You'll see! "

Before long, Freckles heard the footsteps and loud voices of the Hooliganians.

Bill Rascal, John Deebull and Tom Spider came up to the door. They were talking about something and laughing gleefully—they had probably thought up some horrible punishment for Freckles.

The bolt was pushed back with a grating noise, and the door opened. The wide grins on the Hooliganians' faces froze and instantly turned into ugly grimaces. They looked flabbergasted at the Sunbeam Bunnies surrounding Freckles. The Hooliganians had

probably never seen any real Sunbeam Bunnies, although they must have heard a lot about them. They forgot about Freckles in a trice, and instead of seizing him, pounced on the Sunbeam Bunnies. What fools—they obviously didn't know that it was impossible to catch a Sunbeam Bunny. After all, how can one catch a sunray?!

It was truly a sight for sore eyes! The Hooliganians fell on the ground with a mighty thud, beat it with their hands, jerked their legs, and even snapped at the Sunbeam Bunnies. But the Sunbeam Bunnies slipped away right from under their noses. To tease the Hooliganians, the Sunbeam Bunnies purposely fidgeted around them, while the Hooliganians clutched at the air fiercely with their hands.

Under different circumstances, Freckles would have enjoyed the rib-aching fun, looking at all this, but now he didn't lose time and ran out of the cave on the double.







13. THE END OF THE "WITCH'S BROOM"

Without looking at his feet, Freckles ran on for all he was worth. He had only one thought: to get away from the Hooliganians as quickly as possible. Only after he found himself in the forest again, did he stop and catch his breath.

A deathly silence hung over the forest. There was no sound of any pursuit. The Hooliganians must have lost sight of him. The danger was past. But how could he find the Squirrel Vivera's hollow now?

Brother Chik would be expecting him there after sunset. How far was he from that hollow? As you know, the Hooliganians lugged him off in a sack to the Cave of Thirty-Three Troubles. So he simply couldn't know the way. The Sunbeam Bunnies, too, could not help him because the sun had already set, it was growing dark, and night was creeping on.

Freckles became sad and miserable. What a dreadful fix he was in! He ran away from the Hooliganians, went through so many grave dangers only to see all his efforts crumble. Freckles sat down on a tree stump and thought deeply. Suddenly someone touched his shoulder cautiously. Freckles looked round: there before him stood the Grey Bunny he had saved from the Hooliganians. Freckles smiled kindly at him.

The bunny nodded as if he were inviting Freckles to follow him.

"What can I do for you?" Freckles asked.

The bunny didn't say anything in reply. He was just an ordinary bunny, not a fairytale one, and so he couldn't speak. He only beckoned Freckles persistently to follow him. Freckles responded. It was still better to be in



the company of a bunny than to sit there all alone.

For a long time they picked their way through dense thickets, clambering over trees tumbled by thunderstorms and jumping across snaking forest brooks.

To Freckles' great surprise he saw that they had come to the very same hundred-year-old oak containing Squirrel Vivera's hollow. It had grown completely dark by then, and sitting there on a twig was the Moonbeam Bunny.

"Oh, it's you," Brother Chik said joyously on seeing Freckles. "I was already thinking something happened to you, and so I worried."

Freckles told Brother Chik about his latest adventure, and added at the end:

"If it hadn't been for the Grey Bunny I would never have found my way back here."

"Oh yes, the Grey Bunnies are a wonderful bunch. They always help others in trouble. On the whole, they're generously kind souls. Thank you, brother."

At that the Grey Bunny became embarrassed and hopped away into a bush.

Freckles and the Moonbeam Bunny set off. And again there was the forest, with its tangle of trees, shrubs and thickets all around.

You must be fed up with reading about Freckles walking through the forest all the time. But what could be done about it? Freckles was tired himself after walking for such a long time. Anyway, have patience. Presently, they came to a tremendous old willow tree with a gnarled, wrinkled trunk, its doddering matted twigs bathing in the dark water of a forest lake. Right on top of the willow grew a thick green bunch of



mistletoe—the very “Witch’s Broom” that hid Mr. Gloom’s magic cloak.

The moon shone through the willow branches which cast their sombre shadows over the water. The brown shaggy water plants stirring in the lake looked like the beard of some freakish water monster. Next to the willow tree stood a big moss-covered tree stump which resembled a lurking blood-sucking spider. Its rotted core glowed, and it looked as though the spider was staring into the night with one eye. The night was strangely silent as though waiting for something to happen.

A scary place indeed!

But Freckles overcame his fear, hugged the trunk with his arms, and started clambering up the willow tree. The higher he went, the harder it was to climb. The twigs grabbed his shirt and pants, scratched his hands, and blocked his way to the “Witch’s Broom”. He couldn’t see either the ground or the sky—everything was hidden by foliage. Freckles was so frightened that he wanted to cry. His strength was failing him. But then the foliage thinned out, and the moon flashed through again. One more effort—and Freckles was there. Something black could be seen in the thick mistletoe twigs. It was Mr. Gloom’s cloak! Freckles recognized it at once. But just as he stretched out his hand, the twigs of the mistletoe closed suddenly, interlaced, and hid the cloak. Freckles tried to push the twigs aside, but only scratched his hands. What a wretched nuisance! What now? Then he remembered that in his pocket he had a penknife he had inherited from his father. Although one half of its blade was broken, it still was sharp as a razor and could cut through anything. Freckles took the knife out of his pocket and—slash! slash! —the mistletoe twigs dropped to the ground one



after another. He could almost hear them screech and hiss with powerless fury.

Even after he had picked up the cloak, Freckles was still swinging his knife until he had cut off every mistletoe twig. This was the end of the "Witch's Broom". The old willow tree grew young at once, straightened up, shook its leaves and uttered a pleasant, rustling sound. As the boy was climbing down, he felt as though the willow tree was helping him, carefully supporting him with its branches in case he slipped and fell.

The first thing Freckles did when he touched the ground was look for the Moonbeam Bunny. But he had disappeared. Freckles remembered that the Moonbeam Bunny was sitting by the stump as he climbed up the tree. Now there was no trace of him there. Freckles looked up into the sky and realized what was the matter. The moon had slipped behind a cloud. A gusty wind—the first herald of rain—swept through the tree tops with a shrill whistle. Some minutes later raindrops hammered down on the leaves. Freckles squirmed—one raindrop had fallen down his neck. Only a fool would get drenched when he had a cloak in his hands! So Freckles threw the cloak over his shoulders. No sooner had he huddled up inside it than he suddenly felt himself taking off into the air. He soared upward like a bird, his feet brushing against the top of the willow tree. Then he rose higher, flying through the rain clouds, and after he reached the star-studded sky, he flew onward.

Freckles had a remarkably familiar sensation as though he were flying in his sleep. That often happens with us: you dream that you are flying; a jerk and up you float—and before you know it, you're off the ground and in the air, your body light and weightless.

I'm sure, my dear readers, that you have all flown in your sleep more than once and know this unusual sensation very well.

So don't be surprised then that Freckles, once he had thrown Mr. Gloom's cloak over his shoulders, suddenly began to fly like in sleep. After all, it wasn't an ordinary cloak but a magic one, and

it belonged to Mr. Gloom, who was in charge of all horrible nightmares.

Freckles didn't even have the time to get really scared when he arrived in the familiar place amid the mountains—at the Magic Lake. Just like before, the lake turned into a mirror. But Freckles wasn't surprised by the transformation this time.

He was very glad to have made his way back so easily and simply. Without a second thought, Freckles stepped into the Magic Mirror. But the next instant he saw stars in his eyes, and a big bump started to swell on his forehead. Freckles had run headlong into the mirror glass. Goodness gracious! What had happened? Freckles first felt his bump and then the hard, impenetrable surface of the mirror. The Magic Mirror would not allow Freckles into the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. But why? He simply couldn't understand it. However much he touched the mirror, his fingers felt hard, thick glass.

Then, suddenly, a thought flashed through his mind: he'd forgotten to take Mr. Gloom's cloak off! So Freckles took off the cloak in a jiffy, rolled it up, put it under his arm, and again touched the mirror. This time his hand poked into an empty space. Then he stealthily edged through the mirror with an extended hand and hunched-up shoulders. But he didn't need to be nervous.

The rolled up cloak had turned into an ordinary harmless rag. The way was open.

Freckles entered the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies.



14. UNUSUAL HAPPENINGS AT THE CASTLE OF MAGIC FAIRY TALES

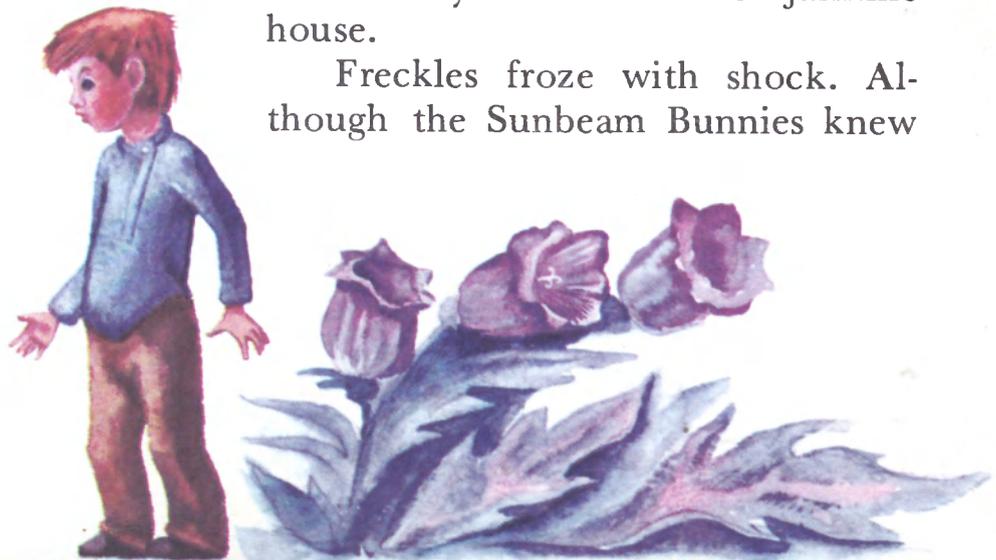
On the threshold of their jasmine house, Uncle Yas, Auntie Tasia and their Sunbeam Bunnies were impatiently awaiting Freckles. Freckles was so happy to see them all again! He was just about to throw his arms around them with joy when he remembered in time that he could not do that anyway; you cannot possibly embrace the Sunbeam Bunnies made of sunrays! So he just had to be content with exchanging greetings.

After he had entered the house, Freckles put the cloak in a corner where his jacket hung, and forgot it right away. This was because firstly, everything unpleasant, alarming and bad was instantly forgotten in the presence of the Sunbeam Bunnies. That was the peculiarity with these remarkable beings. Secondly, Auntie Tasia invited him to the table piled high with all sorts of flowers that smelled so tasty. Their scent made Freckles feel faint with hunger. Yet he did not get the chance to enjoy his meal.

Right before everyone's eyes, the cloak stirred, started to rise and unfold, and a second later, Mr. Gloom stood in the jasmine house, his head touching the ceiling.

"Ha-ha-ha!" his horrible, ominous laughter seemed to come out of a deep well. "All of you tremble now! This is the end of your wretched land!" And with these words, Mr. Gloom walked unhurriedly out of the jasmine house.

Freckles froze with shock. Although the Sunbeam Bunnies knew



that Mr. Gloom would show up sooner or later, they were utterly confused at first. When they ran out of the house, they saw Mr. Gloom directing his steps toward the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. His black figure stood out strikingly against the flowery sunny land. Wherever his black shadow fell, the flowers wilted and dried up right away. Mind you, as soon as he had passed them, they came alive again and bloomed just as before. Even so it was a horrible sight to behold.

The inhabitants of the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales went about their work as usual, without suspecting anything. Everything was quiet and peaceful.

Then, all of a sudden, strange things started to happen.

Aladdin who had been diligently cleaning his magic lamp with chalk, threw it on the floor, and started trampling on it with his feet.

The Old Genie Hottabych made himself a big catapult out of his braces and an oven fork and, crawling under a table, started to shoot from there at the good old fairies who were embroidering their wonderful little cushions.

Pinocchio went up to Ilya Muromets and hit him hard on the head with the golden key. Ilya Muromets, who could have thrown



Pinocchio off his feet with one flick, began to bawl like a big baby:

“Why are you beating me?! You think you’re so big and strong, don’t you? Now I’ll go and tell my Mum about you!”

The Old Fisherman’s wife went chasing after Puss in Boots, trying to step on his tail, and yelling:

“Give those boots back! Give those boots back!”

The Old Fisherman stuck his head into the aquarium and was determined to catch the goldfish with his mouth.

In other words, chaos and confusion reigned. You must have already realized that this was all Mr. Gloom’s doing. We don’t know what would have happened if the Sunbeam Bunnies hadn’t arrived. No sooner had they appeared in the castle than everything wicked and bad aroused by Mr. Gloom stopped abruptly. Aladdin clutched his head with despair and immediately started to repair his damaged magic lamp. The Old Genie Hottabych was on his knees, begging forgiveness from the good old fairies for his boyish prank. Pinocchio, with tears running down his cheeks, was apologizing to Ilya Muromets. The Old Fisherman’s wife, too, was almost crying, remembering how she had chased Puss in Boots.

Everyone was alarmed to hear that Mr. Gloom was in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies.

Martial law was immediately declared in the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. The fairy-tale children were temporarily moved to the Palace of Laughter, as were the feeble old fairies. The rest prepared for battle.

By that time, Mr. Gloom had sneaked into the dungeon. He was in his element, here in the darkness. His exultant voice boomed

under the sombre, damp vaults again and again. He greeted the devils, ogres, witches, and set them free. They rushed out



into the open with wild shrieks and shouts, rejoicing in their liberation. What followed was horrible and shocking. These wicked beings turned beautiful, fragrant roses into nasty, ugly toads. The hedge bindweed, wild grape, and other creepers turned into hideous, hissing snakes, and the sunflowers into crocodiles. Before long, the whole land was swarming with vermin!

Moreover, the devils and witches rushed into the Valley of Sweet Dreams and started trampling and destroying the dreams. Instead of sweet dreams, children all over the world suddenly saw such dreadful and strange things in their sleep that they woke up and started to cry.

This wickedness had to be stopped without delay. The inhabitants of the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales all hurled themselves into battle. Oh, but how hard it was fighting these cruel forces! Whereas in ordinary fairy tales, the heroes could calmly chop off the heads of dragons and serpents, topple ogres into abysses, and drive wicked kings up to their ears into the ground—in other words just destroy them, this couldn't happen in the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. This is because all the devils, witches, dragons, serpents, wicked magicians and enchantresses here were the only ones kept specially for fairy tales. If they were to be destroyed, children all over the world would never be able to see them again in fairy tales. Maybe fairy tales would have disappeared altogether, for each



one had someone evil in it for the good hero to fight. So destroying them was out of the question. The only thing to do was to catch them, tie them up, and throw them back into the dungeon.

Oh, what a difficult job it was!

To make their efforts easier, all the fairytale heroes grouped into units: Katigoroshek Rollipea commanded a unit fighting the dragons and serpents; Farmhand Balda led the fight against the devils; Puss in Boots launched an attack on the ogres; the Old Genie Hottabych and Aladdin fought the wicked Oriental genies; while Ivan the Fool advanced his troops against Baba Yaga's forces.

There was a savage battle. Magic wands, lamps, rings and flutes as well as enchanted swords went into action. The ground troops were supported from the air by Flying Carpets, Firebirds and Humpbacked Horses. The battle became more fierce and enraged. But, of course, without the help of the Sunbeam Bunnies, the fairytale heroes would never have overcome all those horrible creatures. The Sunbeam Bunnies blinded the dragons and serpents, and thanks to this tactic, Katigoroshek Rollipea and his companions-in-arms managed to seize the creepy-crawly lot. The Sunbeam Bunnies helped Aladdin and the Old Genie Hottabych chase the genies into their bottles. The Sunbeam Bunnies showed Ivan the Fool how best to deal with Baba Yaga: shove her into her mortar and clamp down the lid. In a word, they came to the aid here and everywhere at the most crucial moment.

At the height of the battle, Freckles who, understandably, was not able to take part, suddenly remembered Mr. Gloom. Where had that villain gone? Had he managed to free the Troll after all? And why had everyone forgotten about him, the supreme enemy?

But with a furious battle in progress, it was useless to remind anyone that Mr. Gloom had disappeared. So Freckles decided to look into the matter himself.

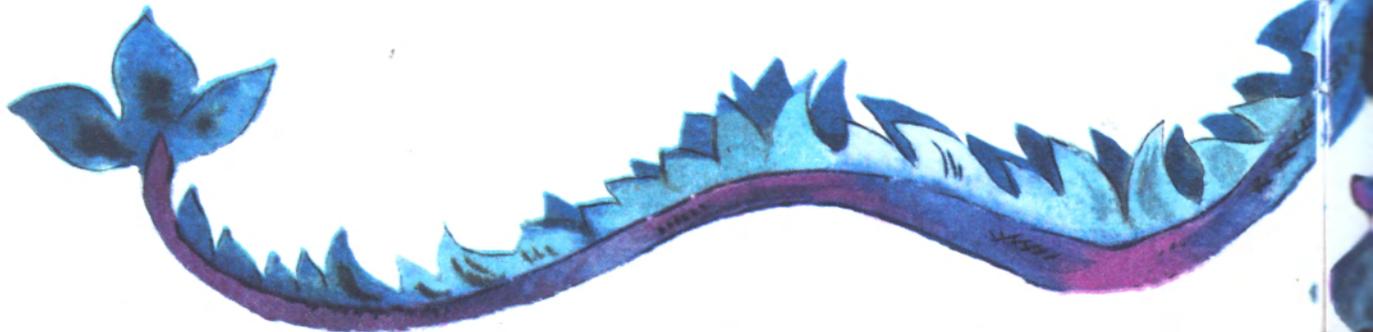
Cautiously, hiding behind the shrubs in case he caught the eye of some wicked magician and was turned into a rat, toad or crocodile, Freckles edged towards the door of the dungeon.



He went down the stairs, stopped, and listened intently. Somewhere far, far from the depth of the long, dark corridor, came desperate screams and curses. Freckles didn't risk it any farther. He had suffered so much from Mr. Gloom he hadn't the slightest desire to meet him again in this spooky place. Without finding out anything, he went up again.

The battle had ceased by then. Throughout the land good magicians were walking with their magic wands in hand, disenchanting the flowers. The toads, serpents and crocodiles again turned into roses, fragrant bindweed, sunflowers and all sorts of other flowers. Freckles met Katigoroshek Rollipea who was approaching the dungeon with the last trussed dragon under his arm.

"Uncle Katigoroshek!" Freckles cried, and rushed over to him. "Mr. Gloom is in the dungeon. You've forgotten about him completely. He's down there yelling and swearing. He must have set the Troll free. Oh, what will happen now!"



“Hey, don’t cause a panic around here,” Katigoshek Rollipea said, smiling. “The Sunbeam Bunnies, friend, aren’t the kind to forget the most important thing. Come on, let’s go and have a look! ”

“Oh no, don’t! ”

“Don’t be afraid, lad! You’ll see that there’s nothing to be afraid of any more.”

Freckles looked at him distrustfully. Yet Katigoshek Rollipea had such a mighty appearance that it seemed absurd to be afraid of anything when he was around. So Freckles joined him.

On the way, Katigoshek Rollipea threw the trussed dragon into a cell and quickly locked it with a huge padlock—of course, it was a magic lock which no evil power could open from then on! Then they went down the long, dark underground corridor. Their way was shown by fireflies who sat on the ceiling at regular intervals and lit up the corridor like lamps.

The hideous faces of witches, devils and ogres looked at them from behind the cell bars in the semi-darkness. Their eyes flashed; they growled wildly and bit into the bars. It seemed as though they would get out again at any moment. But it only appeared to be so. You see, those were magic cell bars, and the devils and witches could only dream of getting out of jail.



One cell had shelves with rows of bottles just like a wine cellar. These were bottles with the evil Oriental genies. Through the glass they could be seen writhing and twisting. Another cell had a big mortar with a lid clapped over it. The mortar kept jumping up and down all the time. In it sat the witch Baba Yaga, who was no more than an old hag and could not frighten anyone now.

In the third cell something pretty strange was going on. When Katigoroshek Rollipea and Freckles approached the cell, they saw a huge wild boar running around inside it, trying to break through the thick bars with his mighty tusks. Then right before their eyes the boar turned into a tiny mouse who wanted to slip through the bars, but at that very moment the bars turned into a dense steel net. Then, the mouse turned into a mosquito, but instead of the net there was a thick glass which the mosquito kept hitting against, making wicked squeaks. This went on without end.

Sure enough, the wicked fairy-tale characters were safely under lock and key.

Still, where was Mr. Gloom? They had walked through almost the entire dungeon, but there was no trace of him.

Suddenly a thunderous voice came from the most remote corner of the corridor, mouthing such vile curses and damnations that Freckles blushed and clapped his hands over his ears. It was the voice of Mr. Gloom. What had happened? Why was he cursing so furiously?

“Look! Look!” Katigoroshek Rollipea exclaimed. “I told you.”

Freckles looked in the direction Katigoroshek Rollipea was pointing. In the very last cell the Troll sat on the floor behind thick bars, weeping bitterly and wiping the tears with his goat’s beard. In front of the cell stood some odd-looking contraption rather like a samovar. Freckles tried to make out the shape of Mr. Gloom, whose voice he had just heard, but he couldn’t.

“I can’t see him,” Freckles said at last.

“And you never will,” Katigoroshek Rollipea said. “As a mat-

ter of fact, no one will ever see him again. He's trapped in there."

It was true. Like a ridiculous, foolish mouse, the cleverest and most cunning Mr. Gloom had been lured into a trap specially invented for him by the Sunbeam Bunnies. The trap consisted of a complicated, trackless labyrinth with no exit. Its walls were made of magic mirrors. When Mr. Gloom rushed into the trap, thinking it was the entrance to the Troll's cell, the Sunbeam Bunnies let a sunray into the labyrinth. Just one sunray. Bouncing off the mirrors, it lit up everything inside brightly. If anyone looked inside there, he could be blinded. There wasn't a single dark nook or cranny where Mr. Gloom could hide himself. So he was doomed to scurry around without finding a way out of that sea of light till the end of time.

So the world was freed from its most horrible, most powerful, and most elusive enemy.

It is hard to describe the joy with which this news was met in the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies.

A magnificent feast was held in the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. No fairy tale has ever described such a feast. Wine poured like—Oops! Sorry, I'm wrong: there wasn't any wine. There was no need for it. There was enough joyous merriment anyway. Instead of wine, there were riverfuls of laughter. The fairy-tale heroes raised their goblets filled with delighted, hearty, bubbling laughter! Oh my, and what dances there were! Even the oldest fairies flung aside their embroidery and burst forth in dance. And the Old Genie Hottabych who, as you know, is hundreds of years old, danced with so much gusto that when he jumped in the air, his trousers caught on a chandelier. The fire brigade had to be called out to get him down.

They feasted all night until dawn, that is, right up to the hour when the Sunbeam Bunnies had to hurry to the earth.



15. WHAT HAPPENED NEXT

Thus, the last wicked force on earth was safely locked away: the Manager of the Office of Nightmares, the horrible and merciless Mr. Gloom was confined forever to the dungeon of the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales. Without their chief to supervise them, the nightmares proved powerless and quiet, and disappeared without a trace.

Oh, what a bright, merry and better place the world became right away! Whatever happened to the malicious, gloomy faces? Everyone was walking happily and with smiles on their faces. It seemed as though there had never been any gloomy people. After all, it was nightmares that previously brought unpleasant, bad thoughts into people's minds.

Even the Hooliganians, the unscrupulous bandits and murderers that they were, became a powerless, cowardly and pathetic lot without help from the wicked forces. The Frecklelanders defeated them and chased them out of their land. Freckleland became free and independent again. Following the example of Freckleland, all the other lands—and there were quite a few—also began to shake off the oppression of the Hooliganians. Soon the rule of the Hooliganians, who had seized almost half of the world, was overthrown everywhere.

The residents of the Cave of Thirty-Three Troubles also met a sorry end. The Sunbeam Bunnies destroyed the cave and burned each and every disease to cinders. But unfortunately not before these devilish creatures had managed to spread throughout the whole world. Still doctors got down to work and are now controlling them successfully. It goes without saying that in the future the diseases will be done away with for good.

For a long time the Sunbeam Bunnies wracked their brains over what to do with the queendom of the Black Night. Without Mr. Gloom the queendom was worth nothing as a dark force. It could be destroyed in a minute. But if they did that, night would



disappear forever, and there would be only day all the time. There wouldn't, of course, be any mornings or evenings, and that was something to think about. Was it worth destroying, after all?

Firstly, people had grown used to the night. They usually slept at night and had happy dreams. Sleeping in the daytime would be quite odd.

Secondly, night-time is very beautiful. For instance, people enjoy walking along the beach on a moonlit night and watching the Moonbeam Bunnies running up and down the moonlight path on the water? So why stop all that? Incidentally, the Moonbeam Bunnies would have to disappear forever too, because, as you know, they appear only in the night.

And what about the quiet summer evenings, when the tired, setting sun sheds a golden tint over everything?

And what about the early mornings in May, when the first sunrays, bathing in the sparkling dew, rouse nature from her sleep and fill the orchards with chirruping birds?

No, it would have been a pity to give all this up!

Besides, the Sunbeam Bunnies would have to stay on the earth all the time and without rest they surely would have become very tired. The Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies would have suddenly become deserted and useless. So would it be closed, or what? And what would happen to the Valley of Happy Dreams and the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales? Lots and lots of questions would have to be answered.

So the Sunbeam Bunnies decided to destroy only the Queen of the Black Night and not night itself. And that's just what they did.

But in some places in the world, say,



in the north, they nonetheless decided, for the sake of an experiment, to organize “white nights”, that is, such nights on which it was as bright as during the day. If the experiment proves successful, maybe the nights will be done away with altogether in the future. At the moment, it is too early to discuss this question. Let’s wait and see.

The Sunbeam Bunnies also spared the mean tribe of Thunderstormers and Thunderclouders. Firstly, because they did not act of their own will but were influenced by Mr. Gloom and the nightmares. Secondly, to tell you the truth, this tribe wasn’t so dangerous after all—they rattled and flashed, but did not really do any harm. On the contrary, they did a lot of good by pouring water on the earth, which helped plants to grow better. As for King Thunder and Queen Thunderbolt, people deal with them easily by using lightning conductors. Besides, the Sunbeam Bunnies always get the better of the Thunderstormers and Thunderclouders, and people love watching how, in honour of their victory, the Sunbeam Bunnies dance a rainbow dance in the sky. That’s a truly beautiful sight to behold!

Well, and what about Freckles? What happened to him?

Oh, don’t you worry about him. He was quite all right. After visiting the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies and seeing all kinds of fairy tale shows at the Castle of Magic Fairy Tales, he returned, at long last, to his native Freckleland, which was now free, independent and happy.

But that is not all.

A fairy tale usually ends with the hero marrying a princess and becoming a prince, king or at least a rich man living in clover and doing nothing. But if only you knew how dull and boring it is to be a king,



even a good and kind one, and doing nothing! No wonder fairy tales end at this point, because there's nothing else to tell about except sheer boredom and nonsense.

No, Freckles did not become a rich man, nor a king, nor a prince for that matter. And, of course, he did not marry! Wherever would you find people marrying at the age of nine? He returned to Grandad Wizard in the Refuge of Kind Friends.

After his land had been freed from the Hooliganians, all the parents, understandably, took their children back, and the place at the Blue Rocky Mountains was deserted. But Grandad Wizard did not leave the colony. He stayed there for the rest of his days and so did the two old nannies. And when Freckles returned, he stayed with them, and so there were four of them living in the colony. After talking things over, they decided to turn it into a place for work and play for children. Really, not only for play but for work, too. Now children from all over Freckleland spend their holidays there. They rest, have lots of fun, and work there, too. The colony has many workshops where everyone can do what he likes to do—carpentry, building all sorts of machinery, learning to make shoes, or working with metal.

Freckles, for one, made up his mind to become a gardener when he is grown up. His cherished dream was to make his native land have just as many flowers as he had seen behind the Magic Mirror, and to see his land just as flourishing and beautiful as the Land of the Sunbeam Bunnies. And, you know, it looks like Freckles' dream is coming true, because...

Oh well, we'd better listen to what Grandad Wizard has to say about this:

"This boy simply has talent. I've never seen saplings taking root so well or growing so fast and blossoming so riotously as with him. He must have a secret."

Of course, it never occurred to Grandad Wizard that Freckles had helpers who were invisible to the human eye. Whenever Freckles worked in the orchard, tending trees or watering them, patches

of sunlight kept gleaming around him all the time. They seemed to be just ordinary spots of sunlight, but in fact they were real live Sunbeam Bunnies.

Of course, Freckles' old friends have not forgotten him and come to help him whether he is working, studying, or having fun during his spare time.

Not only do they help Freckles, but also all kind people. Wherever people are busy doing free, happy work, wherever there is joy and laughter, there are always the Sunbeam Bunnies, because they exist to make people's lives bright, joyful and happy.

Maybe you'll say that you can't see them?!

Oh, you have probably forgotten that they are extremely shy!

Even so, have a good look around! They hide in your smile and in your eyes beaming with joy and happiness.

And mind you, whenever you're in a good and cheerful mood, whenever you're doing a good and honest job, the Sunbeam Bunnies are always at your side.



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