

Bridesman Sun and Bride
Bridekins



Bridesman Sun and Bride Bridekins

ONCE upon a time there was a miller and his wife, and both were miserly and hard of heart. When the Emperor's servants brought corn to be ground, the miller would grind the corn free of all charge and send the Emperor a gift into the bargain, only to gain favour with the mighty Emperor and his daughter, the proud princess. But when poor folk came to have their corn ground, the miller would take one measure in payment for every two that he ground, and without that he would not grind at all.

One day, just about Yuletide and in the time of bitter frost, an old wife came to the mill—an old wife all patches and tatters. The mill stood in a little grove by the stream, and no one could say whence that old wife had come.

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But this wasn't just an old wife like other old wives ; it was Mother Muggish. Now Muggish could turn herself into any mortal thing, a bird or a snake, or an old woman or a young girl. And besides that she could do anything, both good and bad. But woe to him who got into her bad books, for she was very spiteful. Muggish lived in the morass on the fringe of the bog where the autumn sun dwelt. And with her the sun put up over the long winter night ; for Muggish knew potent herbs and powerful spells ; she would nurse and cherish the feeble old sun till he grew young again at Yuletide and started on his way once more.

"Good day to you," Mother Muggish called out to the miller and his wife. "Just grind this bag of corn for me."

The old wife stood the bag on the floor, and the miller agreed :

"I'll grind it for you ; half the bag for you for your cake, and half for me for my trouble."

"Not so, my son ! I shall not have enough for my Yuletide cake, because I have six sons, and

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for seventh my grandson, the Sun, who was born to-day."

"Go away and don't talk rubbish, you old fool!" burst out the miller. "A likely one you are to be the Sun's grandmother!"

So they argued this way and that; but the miller wouldn't consent to grind for less than one-half the bag, and so the old wife picked up her bag again and went away by the way she came.

But the miller had a daughter, a beautiful girl, called Bride Bridekins. When she was born, the fairies bathed her in the water that falls from the wheel, so that all evils should turn from her, even as water runs away from a mill. And, moreover, the fairies foretold that at her wedding the Sun should be bridesman. Just fancy! she was the Sun's little bride! So they called her Bride Bridekins, and she was most beautiful and smiling as a summer's day.

Bride Bridekins was sorry when the miller sent away the old wife so unkindly. She went out and waited in the wood for the old wife, and said:

"Come again to-morrow, Mother, when I shall be alone. I will grind your corn for you for nothing."

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Next day the miller and his wife went into the wood to cut the Yule log, and Bride Bridekins was left alone.

Before long the old wife came up with her bag.

“Good fortune be yours, young maiden,” said the wife.

“And yours, too,” returned Bride Bridekins. “Wait a moment, Mother, till we open the mill.”

The mill was worked by a little wheel which caught the water with four paddles set cross-wise, which turned like a spindle. Now the miller had shut off the water, and Bride Bridekins had to wade up to her knees in the icy stream to open the sluice.

The mill clattered, round went the mill-stones, and Bride Bridekins ground the old wife’s corn. She filled up the bag with flour and took nothing for her pains.

“Eh, thank you kindly, maiden,” said Mother Muggish, “and I’ll help you whithersoever your feet may carry you, since your feet you did not save from the ice-cold wave, nor grudge your hands to soil with unrequited toil. And, moreover, I’ll tell my grandson, the Sun, to whom he owes his

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Yuletide cake.” And the old wife took up her bag and went.

From that day nothing would prosper in the mill without Bride Bridekins. Unless her hand was on the mill, the paddles would not take the water; unless she looked in the bin, there would be no flour in it. No matter how much might fall into it from the grain-box, it was all lost on the floor; the bin remained empty unless Bride Bridekins fed the mill. And so it was with everything in and about the mill.

This went on for many a day, on and on and never any change, till the miller and his wife began to be jealous of their daughter and to hate her. The harder the girl worked and the more she earned, the blacker they looked at her, because it came to her as easy as a song, and to them not even with toiling and moiling.

It was upon a morning about Beltane time, when the Sun, strong and flaming, travels across one half of heaven like a ball of pure gold. The Sun no longer slept in the morass, nor did Muggish foster him now; but the Sun was lord of the world,

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and sky and earth obeyed him. Bride Bridekins sat at Beltane time beside the mill and thought to herself :

“ If I could only get away, since I cannot please these cross-patches anyhow!” .

And just as she thought this, there appeared before her the old wife, who was really Muggish.

“ I will help you, but you must obey me in all things, and take care not to offend me,” said the old wife. “ This very morning the proud princess walked in the meadow and lost the keys of her chest and her wardrobe, and now she cannot get at her crown nor her robes either. So the princess has caused it to be proclaimed that whoever finds the keys, if it be a youth the princess will become his true love and bride-to-be, and if it be a maiden, the princess will take her for her first lady-in-waiting. So you come away with me, and I will show you where the keys are lying among the love-lies-bleeding that grows in the meadow. You will bring the princess her keys and become her first lady-in-waiting. You will be dressed in silk and sit by the princess’s knee.”



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Then Muggish at once turned herself into a quail, and Bride Bridekins followed her.

So they came to the meadow in front of the Emperor's castle. Gallant knights and noble dames walked about the meadow, and around the meadow stood their esquires holding mettlesome steeds. One steed only was not held by a squire, but by a barefoot boy. This horse belonged to Oleg the Warden, and it was the most fiery steed of all. And Oleg the Warden himself was the most excellent knight under the sun. You might know Oleg the Warden amid ever so many earls and nobles, because his attire was plain and without ornament, but his white plume, the prize of valour, distinguished him above all the rest.

So the knights and dames walked about the meadow, all trampling the grass with their shoes in their anxiety to find the keys. Only Oleg the Warden kept but a poor look-out for the keys, taking the matter as a mere jest and idle pastime. But from her window the Emperor's daughter looked out and watched to see whom fortune would favour. Very careful watch did she keep, the proud princess,

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and repeated spells for luck so that Oleg the Warden should find the keys.

When Bride Bridekins came with the quail running before her, not a soul in the meadow noticed her but only Oleg the Warden.

"Never yet have I seen so sweet a maiden," thought Oleg the Warden, and strode towards her.

But just then the Emperor's daughter also noticed Bride Bridekins from her window, and so proud and heartless was she that she never stopped to look how sweet the maiden was, but grew very angry, and said: "A fine plight should I be in were that common wench there to find the keys and become my lady-in-waiting!" Thus thinking, she at once sent out her servants to drive away the girl.

Bride Bridekins went over the meadow wherever the quail led her. They came to the middle of the meadow, where the love-lies-bleeding grew tall. The quail parted two leaves at the foot of a tuft of love-lies-bleeding, and under them lay the keys.

Bride Bridekins bent down and picked up the keys; but when she looked up to the Emperor's

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castle and saw the proud princess, Bride Bridekins became frightened, and thought: "How should I become the princess's lady-in-waiting?"

As she thought this she looked up, and lo, beside her stood a glorious knight, as he might have been sworn brother to the Sun. And that was Oleg the Warden.

Quickly Bride Bridekins made up her mind to disobey Muggish's commands, and she held out the keys to Oleg the Warden.

"Take the keys, unknown knight, and let the Emperor's daughter be your true love and bride-to-be," said Bride Bridekins, and could not take her eyes off the glorious knight.

But at that moment came the servants with whips, and roughly rated Bride Bridekins so as to drive her away from the meadow, according to the princess's commands. When Oleg the Warden saw this, he was soon resolved, and thus did he answer Bride Bridekins:

"Thank you for the keys, sweet maiden; but I have made up my mind otherwise. *You* shall be my true love and bride-to-be, because you are fairer

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than the morning star. Here is my good horse ; he will carry us to my Barren Marches."

Gladly did Bride Bridekins go with Oleg the Warden, and he lifted her beside him on to his horse. As the good steed carried them swiftly past the Emperor's daughter sitting at her window, Oleg the Warden threw her the keys so skilfully that they caught right on the window latch !

"There are your keys, august Princess !" cried Oleg the Warden. "Wear your crown and your robes in all happiness, for I have taken the maiden for myself."

All that night Oleg the Warden rode on with Bride Bridekins, and at dawn they arrived in the Barren Marches, at the oaken stronghold of Oleg the Warden. Round the stockade there were three moats, and in the midst of the stockade stood a smoke-blackened house.

"Behold the Castle of Oleg the Warden !" said the knight to Bride Bridekins, and he laughed himself because his castle was not more splendid. But Bride Bridekins laughed still more heartily because she was to be the lady of such a glorious knight.

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So they settled at once upon the wedding guests, so as to celebrate the marriage. They invited twenty gallants and twenty orphan maids, because that was all the people there were in the Barren Marches. And so that they might be more and merrier, they also asked the Wild Wolf and his Mate from the hills, and the Tawny Eagle, and the Grey Goshawk ; and Bride Bridekins asked two bridesmaids—the Turtle Dove and the Slender Swallow.

And Bride Bridekins even boasted to Oleg the Warden :

“ If the Sun were to recognise me, he too would come to the wedding. The Sun would have been bridesman at the wedding, for so did the fairies foretell.”

And so the wedding guests assembled in the soot-blackened castle, to make merry—and never knew of the ill fate in store for them.

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Now it had stung the proud princess to the heart when Oleg the Warden had flung her the keys, and before so many nobles, before earls and knights,

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refused the august princess and preferred a nameless maiden.

So the princess persuaded the Emperor, her father, and begged and entreated him till he lent her his mighty army. Well mounted, the army advanced upon the Barren Marches of Oleg the Warden with the wrathful princess at its head.

The guests were just at table when the army came in sight. It was so great that it covered all the Barren Marches till you could not see so much as a patch of earth for it. And in front of the army a herald cried aloud for all the world to hear :

Behold a gallant army
Has taken the field ;
The Warden is a rebel,
We bid him to yield.
Alive shall he be taken
That freedom loved best ;
But the heart shall be riven
From his lady's breast.

When Oleg the Warden heard this, he asked
Bride Bridekins :

“ Are you afraid, lovely maiden ? ”

“ I am not afraid,” she smilingly made answer.

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“I put my trust in the Grey Wolf and his Mate, in your twenty gallants and twenty orphans, and most of all in the knight Oleg the Warden. And besides that I have two brave bridesmaids—the Turtle Dove and the Slender Swallow.”

Oleg the Warden smiled, and already the wedding guests had lightly sprung to their feet. They seized their warriors' weapons, both gallants and orphans, and stood by the windows of the soot-blackened castle stringing their good bows with silken cords as they waited for the princess and her army. But that army was so mighty that neither Oleg the Warden, nor his wedding guests, nor the soot-blackened house were able to withstand it.

The first to fall were the Grey Wolf and his Mate; for they jumped the stockade and the moats and rushed straight at the Emperor's army to tear out the proud princess's eyes in the midst of her army. But a hundred maces rose in the air; the soldiers defended the proud princess, the Eagle and the Grey Goshawk had their pinions broken, and then the heavy horses trampled them into the black earth.

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The great host came nearer and nearer to the soot-blackened house. When it was fairly on the threshold the wedding guests loosed their silken bowstrings and greeted the soldiers with a shower of arrows.

But the wrathful archers of the wrathful princess did not stop !

Arrows flew hither and thither. There were archers past counting in the army, so that their arrows flew in at the windows of the soot-blackened house like a plague from heaven. Each gallant had his two or three wounds to show, and each orphan some ten.

But the most grievous wound of all was upon Oleg the Warden. His good right hand hung powerless, so greatly was he overcome by his wound.

Quickly Bride Bridekins stepped up to Oleg the Warden to wash his wound in the courtyard of the soot-blackened house. While she was washing his wound, Oleg the Warden said to her :

“ It’s a poor fortune we have garnered, my Bride Bridekins. There are none left for you to put



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your trust in, and here is the host at the gates of the soot-blackened house. They will break down the oak stockade, batter down the ancient gates. We are lost; this is the end of us—wolves and eagles, and gallants and orphans, and Oleg the Warden and his Bride Bridekins ! ”

But Bride Bridekins considered sadly, and then she said :

“ Do not fear, brave Warden. I will send the Turtle Dove to fetch Muggish from her morass. There is nothing Muggish does not know and nothing she cannot do, and she will help us.”

So Bride Bridekins sent out the swift Turtle Dove. Away flew the grey dove swifter than an arrow from the string, nor did the soldiers’ darts overtake her. Off she flew and brought back Muggish from the bog. But Muggish had turned herself into a raven and perched upon the gable of the soot-blackened House.

Already the soldiers were battering at the entrance. Heavy clubs hammered on the doors and portals, banging and clanging till all the courts and passages of the soot-blackened house rang again, as

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though a host from the nethermost Pit were beating on the gates of Oleg the Warden.

“Fair greeting, dear Muggish!” the lovely Bride appealed to the black raven—“fair greeting! Help us against the Princess’s malice, or else we must all die untimely!”

But Muggish had only bided her time spitefully for an opportunity to give vent to her grievance. Flapping her black wings, the raven said:

“Save yourself, my little dove! If you had listened to me, you would have given the Princess her keys. You would have basked in royal grace, beside the Princess had your place, in sumptuous silk fair to behold, sipping wine from a cup of gold. But now you have gotten your heart’s desire. Here you are in the soot-blackened house with none but sore-wounded beggars within and a countless host outside. Seek help from those whose counsel brought you to this!”

When Oleg the Warden heard this, he sprang to his feet, all wounded as he was, and wrathfully cried out:

“Leave this unprofitable business, Bride Bride-

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kins ! When had a hero help from a raven ? And you," he called to Muggish, "get off my roof, you black bird of ill-omen, lest I waste a good swift arrow and shoot the bird upon my gable !" With that Oleg the Warden embraced Bride Bridekins and said :

"When I perish in the midst of the Emperor's host, go, my lovely little Bride ! submit yourself to the Princess, and you shall be lady-in-waiting to the proud Princess, who should have been true love and lady of Oleg the Warden." For a moment Oleg the Warden flinched ; but then he tore himself away from his bride, and rushed through the courtyard and passage to raise the oaken bars, to throw open the gates to the countless host, to perish or cut his way through their numbers.

Bride Bridekins was left alone in the castle, and above her on the roof perched the black raven. She could hear the heavy oaken bars falling ; now the ancient gates must yield ; another moment and the cruel soldiers will burst in, take Oleg prisoner, and rive the heart out of the breast of her, sweet child ! Bride Bridekins' thoughts chased through her brain : What is to be done, and how ?

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The lovely bride looked all around to see if there were any found to pity her in her distress. She bent her beauteous eyes to earth, and raised them heavenward. As she raised them heavenward the Sun travelled across the zenith in a blaze of pure gold. And as she looked at the Sun, the Sun marvelled at so much loveliness, and at once looked back at her. The Sun and Bride Bridekins looked at one another, and as they looked, they recognised one another, and at once the Sun remembered. "Why, that is the little bride whose Bridesman the Sun was to be! In a lucky hour she gave me my Yuletide bread, and in a yet luckier moment she sought me overhead."

Just one moment before the Sun had heard Muggish mocking Bride Bridekins and spitefully refusing to help her. So now the Sun thundered forth his anger. All the land fell silent with fear; axes and clubs were dropped in terror as the Sun thundered at Muggish:

"Eh, foster-mother, heart of stone! were the world's justice to be carved by spite, what crooked justice would pervert the right! If thou from slime

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hast reared me, yet content art thou to keep the slime thine element ! With me thou hast not strode across the sky, nor from the heavens downward bent thine eye to learn how justice should be born of light. Fie, foster-mother, heart of stone ! What ! should the Sun at Beltane in his might forget who sent him gifts on Yule night, when he was a feeble babe ? Or shall Bridesman Sun take it ill of the bride that she left the Emperor's palace and the Princess's court because she preferred a hero in her heart ? Down with you into the earth, black-hearted nurse ! so that you underground, and I from the skies, may help yon worthy knight and his lovely lady."

Sky and earth obey the Sun, and how should the black raven—and that was Muggish—withstand his commands ? Upon the instant Muggish sank into the earth to do the Sun's bidding.

And strong as the Sun had been before, he now made himself yet stronger. The Sun smote from above ; he scorched the Barren Marches ; he seared heaven and earth ; he would have melted the Mountain of Brass !

Upon the cruel soldiers' heads their helmets

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dissolved; their heavy armour melted; spears and axes grew red-hot. Heat overcame the wrathful princess; heat overcame the multitude of archers as their brains grilled inside their helmets, and their breasts laboured with the heat under their armour. Who had not the shelter of a roof could not live. All the host was struck down by the heat. They fell one atop of the other. A man would call upon his sworn brother, and then the voice would cease as the speaker perished.

While the Sun was thus smiting the cruel soldiers, Muggish helped the Sun from underground. She opened deep bogholes under their feet. Whenever the Sun struck down a man, there a boghole would gape beneath him. He slipped into the bog, and the bog closed above him; where a man stood, there his grave yawned for him.

So the soldiers vanished one by one, and the archers one by one, and the weapons of war, and the clubs and the axes. It was terrible to behold such a vast army stricken by the judgment of the Sun from the skies. The Sun was executioner and the earth gravedigger. Yet a little while, an hour or two, and the great host had vanished—not a soul was left

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alive in the Barren Marches. Only those who were under the roof of the soot-blackened house, they were left alive.

Once more all was still in the Barren Marches ; and now the lovely lady, Bride Bridekins, peeped joyously from her window to watch her bridesman grow mild, now that he had done with slaying spite upon the earth.

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Soon the wounds healed upon the gallants, for they had good luck to help them ; and the orphans recovered still more quickly, because hardship is a good school. As for Oleg Ban, he could not pine with such a true love as Bride Bridekins beside him. Early in the morning the Slender Swallow flew out with a greeting for the Sun. At nightfall the Swallow returned with greetings from the Sun, bidding them prepare the wedding feast for the morrow, for he would come to give away the bride.

So they made ready, and it all fell out as they had planned. And such a wedding as they had, and such songs as were sung that day in the Barren Marches you'll not find again in a hundred years, nor throughout nine empires.