



P E N G U I N



C L A S S I C S

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF CHRISTMAS STORIES

FROM HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN
TO ANGELA CARTER

EDITED BY JESSICA HARRISON

PENGUIN  CLASSICS

THE PENGUIN BOOK OF CHRISTMAS STORIES

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HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN

The Fir Tree

Translated by Tiina Nunnally

Out in the forest stood such a charming fir tree. It was in a good spot where it could get sunshine and there was plenty of air. All around grew scores of bigger companions, both firs and pines, but the little fir tree was so eager to grow up that it didn't think about the warm sun or the fresh air. It didn't pay any attention to the farm children who walked past, chattering, whenever they were out gathering strawberries or raspberries. Often they would come by with a whole pitcher full or they would have strawberries threaded on a piece of straw. Then they would sit down near the little tree and say, 'Oh, how charming and little it is!' That's not at all what the tree wanted to hear.

The following year it was a full length taller, and the year after that yet another. On a fir tree you can always tell how many years it has been growing by how many layers of branches it has.

'Oh, if only I were a big tree like the others,' sighed the little tree. 'Then I could spread out my branches all around and from the top I could gaze out on the wide world. The birds would build nests in my branches, and when the wind blew, I could nod so grandly, like all the others.'

The tree took no pleasure in the sunshine, in the birds, or in the crimson clouds that sailed overhead both morning and evening.

When it was winter, and the snow lay all around, glittering white, a hare often came bounding along and sprang right over the little tree. Oh, how annoying that was! But two winters passed and by the third the tree was so tall that the hare had to go around it. 'Oh, to grow and grow, to get bigger and older. That is the only lovely thing in this world,' thought the tree.

In the autumn the woodcutters would always appear to chop down

some of the biggest trees. It happened every year, and the young fir tree, which was now quite grown-up, would start trembling because the tall, magnificent trees would topple to the ground with a groan and a crash. Their branches would be cut off, and they looked so naked, tall and slender. They were almost beyond recognition. But then they were loaded onto wagons, and horses carried them away, out of the forest.

Where were they going? What was in store for them?

In the spring, when the swallow and stork appeared, the tree asked them: 'Do you know where they were taken? Have you seen them?'

The swallows didn't know anything, but the stork looked thoughtful, nodded his head, and said, 'Oh, yes, I think so. I met many new ships as I flew here from Egypt. On the ships were magnificent mast trees, and I'd venture to say they were yours. They smelled of fir. I bring you many greetings. How they swaggered and swayed!'

'Oh, if only I too were big enough to fly across the sea! What is the sea like, anyway? How does it look?'

'Well, it's much too complicated to describe,' said the stork and flew off.

'Enjoy your youth!' said the rays of sunlight. 'Enjoy your fresh growth and the young life inside you!'

The wind kissed the tree, and the dew shed tears over it, but the fir tree did not understand.

When Christmastime came, quite young trees were felled, trees that were often not even as tall or as old as the fir tree, which could never find any peace but was always eager to be off. These young trees, and they were the most beautiful of all, always kept their branches. They were loaded onto wagons, and horses carried them away, out of the forest.

'Where are they going?' asked the fir tree. 'They're no bigger than I am. There was even one that was much smaller. Why do they keep all their branches? Where are they being taken?'

'We know! We know!' chirped the sparrows. 'In town we've looked in the windows. We know where they're being taken. Oh, they end up in the greatest splendor and glory you could ever imagine. We've looked in the windows and seen them being planted in the middle of the warm parlor and decorated with the loveliest things: gilded apples, gingerbread, toys, and hundreds of candles!'

'And then?' asked the fir tree, all its branches quiver. 'And then? What happens next?'

'Well, that's all we saw. But nothing could match it.'

'Maybe I was meant to take this glorious path,' rejoiced the fir tree. 'That's even better than going across the sea. What an agony of longing! If only it were Christmas. Now I'm as tall and broad as the others that were carried off last year. Oh, if only I were on that wagon right now. If only I were in the warm parlor with all that splendor and glory! And then . . . ? Well, then something even better is bound to happen, something even more wonderful, or why would they decorate me like that? Something even grander, even more glorious is bound to happen. But what? Oh, how I'm suffering! Oh, how I yearn! I just don't know what's come over me.'

'Take pleasure in us!' said the air and the sunlight. 'Take pleasure in your fresh youth out in the open!'

But the fir tree felt no pleasure at all. It grew and grew. Both winter and summer it was green; dark green it stood there. Everyone who saw it said, 'That's a lovely tree!' And at Christmas, it was the very first to be cut down. The ax bit deep into its marrow, and the tree fell to the ground with a sigh. It felt a pain, a weakness, it couldn't even think about happiness. It was sad to part with its home, with the spot where it had sprouted up, for the tree realized that it would never see its dear old companions again: the small shrubs and flowers all around, maybe not even the birds. Leaving was certainly not pleasant.

The tree didn't recover until it was unloaded in a courtyard with all the other trees and it heard a man say, 'That one is magnificent. That's the one we want.'

Then two servants in fine livery came and carried the fir tree into an enormous, beautiful room. Portraits hung on all the walls, and next to the large woodstove stood big Chinese vases with lions on the lids. There were rocking chairs, silk-covered sofas, big tables covered with picture books, and toys worth a hundred times a hundred *rigsdaler* – at least that's what the children said. And the fir tree was set in a large wooden tub filled with sand, but no one could tell that it was a wooden tub because green fabric was wrapped all around it, and the tub stood on top of a big, colorful carpet. Oh, how the tree trembled! What was going to

happen next? Then the servants and the maids proceeded to decorate the tree. On one branch they hung little woven baskets cut of colored paper; each basket was filled with sweets. Gilded apples and walnuts hung on the tree as if they had grown there, and more than a hundred little candles, red and blue and white, were fastened to the branches. Dolls that looked as lifelike as human beings swayed in the boughs. The tree had never seen anything like it before. And at the very top they put a big star made from shiny gold paper. It was magnificent, quite incomparably magnificent.

‘Tonight,’ they all said, ‘tonight the tree will shine!’

‘Oh,’ thought the tree. ‘If only it were evening. If only they’d light the candles soon. And what will happen after that? Will trees come from the forest to look at me? Will the sparrows fly past the window? Will I take root and stand here, decorated like this, all winter and summer long?’

Oh yes, the tree thought it knew all about it. But it had a terrible bark-ache from sheer yearning, and bark-aches are just as bad for trees as headaches are for the rest of us.

Finally the candles were lit. What splendor, what magnificence! Every branch of the tree trembled so much that one of the candles set fire to a bough. How it stung!

‘God help us!’ shrieked the maids, and hastily put out the fire.

Now the tree didn’t even dare tremble. Oh, how awful! It was so afraid of losing any of its finery. It was quite bedazzled by all the splendor. And then the double doors flew open, and a crowd of children rushed in, as if they were about to topple the whole tree. The grown-ups followed more sedately. The children stood in utter silence, but only for a moment. Then they began shouting again so their voices echoed through the room. They danced around the tree, and one present after the other was plucked from the branches.

‘What are they doing?’ thought the tree. ‘What’s going to happen?’ And the candles burned all the way down to the boughs, and as they burned down, they were put out, and then the children were allowed to plunder the tree. Oh, how they rushed at it, making all the branches groan. If the tree hadn’t been tied to the ceiling by its top and the gold star, it would have toppled right over.

The children danced around with their splendid toys. No one paid any attention to the tree except for the old nursemaid, who walked around it, peering in among the branches. But she was only checking to see that not a fig or apple had been overlooked.

'A story! A story!' shouted the children, pulling a stout little man over to the tree, and he sat down right underneath it. 'Because we're out in the forest,' he told them, 'and it may do the tree some good to listen along! But I'm only going to tell you one story. Do you want to hear the one about Ickety-Ackety or the one about Clumpa-Dumpa, who fell down the stairs but still ended up on the throne and won the hand of the princess?'

'Ickety-Ackety!' cried some of the children. 'Clumpa-Dumpa!' cried the others. They shouted and shrieked, and only the fir tree stood in silence and thought, 'Won't I get to take part? Won't I get to do anything?' It had been part of the celebration, after all; it had done what it was supposed to do.

And then the man told the story of Clumpa-Dumpa, who fell down the stairs but still ended up on the throne and won the hand of the princess. And the children clapped their hands and shouted, 'Tell us more, tell us more!' They wanted to hear the one about 'Ickety-Ackety' too, but he would only tell them the story about Clumpa-Dumpa. The fir tree stood quite still and pensive. The birds in the forest had never mentioned anything like this. 'Clumpa-Dumpa fell down the stairs, and yet won the hand of the princess. Well, well, so that's the way the things are out in the world,' thought the fir tree, believing that it was all true because such a nice man had told the story. 'Well, well! Who knows, maybe I too will fall down the stairs and win the princess.' And the fir tree looked forward to the next day when it would be adorned with candles and toys, gold and fruit.

'Tomorrow I won't tremble,' it thought. 'I will fully enjoy all my glory. Tomorrow I'll hear the story about Clumpa-Dumpa again, and maybe the one about Ickety-Ackety too.' And the tree stood still and pensive all night long.

In the morning a servant and a maid came into the room.

'Now the finery is going to start again!' thought the tree. But they dragged it out of the parlor and up the stairs to the attic. And there, in a

dark corner where no daylight shone, they left it. 'What does this mean?' thought the tree. 'I wonder what I'm supposed to do here? I wonder what I'm going to hear now?' It leaned against the wall and stood there thinking and thinking. And it had plenty of time for that, because day after day and night after night went by. No one came up to the attic, and when someone finally did, it was only to put some large boxes in the corner. The tree stood quite hidden; you would almost think it had been completely forgotten.

'Now it's winter outside,' thought the tree. 'The ground is hard and covered with snow. The people wouldn't be able to plant me. No doubt that's why I'm standing here, safe indoors until springtime. What a good plan! How kind the people are! If only it wasn't so dark in here and so terribly lonely. There's not even a little hare. It was so nice out there in the forest when the snow lay on the ground and the hare came running past. Yes, even when it leaped right over me, although I didn't like it much at the time. But up here it's terribly lonely.'

'Squeak, squeak!' said a little mouse at that very moment and came scurrying. And then another little mouse appeared. They sniffed at the fir tree and scurried in and out of its branches.

'It's awfully cold,' said the little mice. 'But otherwise it's quite blissful to be here. Don't you agree, you old fir tree?'

'I'm not old at all!' said the fir tree. 'There are plenty of trees that are much older than I am!'

'Where did you come from?' asked the mice. 'And what do you know?' They were awfully curious. 'Tell us about the loveliest place on earth! Have you ever been there? Have you been in the pantry where cheeses are lined up on the shelves and hams hang from the ceiling? Where you can dance on tallow candles? Where you go in skinny but come out fat?'

'I don't know that place,' said the tree. 'But I do know the forest, where the sun shines and the birds sing.' And then the tree told them all about its youth, and the little mice had never heard anything like that before. They listened closely and said, 'Oh, you've seen so much! How happy you've been!'

'Me?' said the fir tree, thinking about everything it had just described. 'Why yes, I suppose those were quite delightful days, after all.' But then

the tree told them about Christmas Eve, when it was decorated with cakes and candles.

‘Oh!’ said the little mice. ‘How happy you’ve been, you old fir tree!’

‘I’m not old at all!’ said the tree. ‘It was only this winter that I came here from the forest. I’m in the prime of my life, I’ve just stopped growing.’

‘How wonderfully you describe things!’ said the little mice, and the following night they brought along four other little mice who wanted to hear what the tree had to tell. And the more the tree told them, the more clearly it remembered everything and thought, ‘Those actually were quite enjoyable days. But they can come again, they can come again! Clumpa-Dumpa fell down the stairs, yet he won the hand of the princess. Maybe I too can win a princess.’ And then the fir tree thought about a charming little birch tree that grew out in the forest. For the fir tree, the birch was a real and lovely princess.

‘Who’s Clumpa-Dumpa?’ asked the little mice. And then the fir tree told them the whole story; it could remember every single word. And the little mice were ready to run all the way to the top of the tree out of sheer glee. The next night many more mice came, and on Sunday there were even two rats. But they said the story wasn’t amusing, and that made the little mice sad, because then they thought less of the story themselves.

‘Is that the only story you know?’ asked the rats.

‘The only one,’ replied the tree. ‘I heard it on the happiest evening of my life, but back then I didn’t realize how happy I was!’

‘It’s an exceptionally tedious story. Don’t you know any about bacon and tallow candles? Any pantry stories?’

‘No,’ said the tree.

‘Well, thanks for nothing!’ replied the rats, and they went back home.

Eventually the little mice disappeared too, and then the tree sighed, ‘It was so nice having those nimble little mice sitting around me and listening to what I told them. Now that too is over. But I’m going to remember to enjoy myself when they finally take me out of here.’

But when would that happen?

Well, one day in the early morning, servants came up to the attic and started rummaging around. The boxes were moved aside, and the tree

was pulled out. Now, it's true that they threw it to the floor rather hard, but then a man dragged it at once toward the stairs, where daylight was shining.

'Now life will begin again!' thought the tree. It could feel the fresh air, the first rays of sun. And then it was out in the courtyard. Everything happened so fast that the tree forgot all about taking a look at itself. There was so much to see all around. The courtyard was next to a garden, and everything was in bloom. The roses hung so fresh and fragrant over the little fence, the linden trees were blossoming, and the swallows flew about, saying, 'Kirra-virra-vit, my husband has arrived!' But it wasn't the fir tree they meant.

'Now I'm going to live!' rejoiced the tree, spreading its branches wide. But alas, its boughs were all withered and yellow. In the corner among the weeds and nettles was where the tree came to rest. The star made from gold paper was still on its top, shimmering in the bright sunshine.

In the courtyard several of the lively children were playing who had danced around the tree at Christmastime, taking such delight in it. One of the youngest children came over and tore off the golden star.

'Look what's still sitting on the horrid old Christmas tree!' he said, stomping on the branches so they groaned under his boots.

And the tree looked at all that floral splendor and freshness in the garden. Then it looked at itself and wished that it had stayed in the dark corner of the attic. The tree thought about its fresh youth in the forest, about the joyous Christmas Eve, and about the little mice who had listened so happily to the story about Clumpa-Dumpa.

'It's over, it's over!' said the poor tree. 'If only I had enjoyed it while I could. It's over, it's over!'

And the hired man came over and chopped the tree into little pieces; it made a whole stack. How lovely the tree flared up under the big copper cauldron. And it sighed so deeply; each sigh was like the sound of a little shot. That's why the children who were playing came running over and sat down in front of the fire, staring into the flames and shouting, 'Bang, snap!' But with each sharp crack, which was a deep sigh, the tree thought about a summer day in the forest, or about a winter night out there, when the stars were shining. It thought about Christmas Eve

The Fir Tree

and about Clumpa-Dumpa, the only story it had ever heard and knew how to tell. And before long the tree had burned up.

The boys played in the courtyard, and on his chest the youngest one had the gold star that the tree had worn on its happiest evening. Now it was over, and the tree was gone, along with the story. It was over, over, and that's what happens to every story!

PETER CHRISTEN ASBJØRNSON
AND JØRGEN MOE

The Cat on the Dovrefjell

Translated by George Webbe Dasent and D. L. Ashliman

Once upon a time there was a man up in Finnmark who had caught a large white bear, which he was going to take to the King of Denmark. It so happened that he came to the Dovrefjell on Christmas Eve. He went to a cottage where a man lived whose name was Halvor, and he asked the man for lodging for himself and his white bear.

'God bless us!' said the man, 'but we can't give anyone lodging just now, for every Christmas Eve the house is so full of trolls that we are forced to move out, and we'll have no shelter over our own heads, to say nothing of providing for anyone else.'

'Oh?' said the man, 'If that's all, you can very well let me use your house. My bear can sleep under the stove here, and I can sleep in the storeroom.'

Well, he begged so hard, that at last he got permission to stay there. The people of the house moved out, but before they went, everything was made ready for the trolls. The table was set with cream porridge and fish and sausages and everything else that was good, just as for any other grand feast.

When everything was ready, in came the trolls. Some were large, and some were small. Some had long tails, and some had no tails at all. And some had long, long noses. They ate and drank and tasted everything.

Then one of the troll youngsters saw the white bear lying under the stove, so he took a piece of sausage, stuck it onto a fork, and went and poked it against the white bear's nose, burning it. Then he shrieked, 'Kitty, do you want some sausage?'

The white bear rose up and growled, and then chased the whole pack of them out, both large and small.

The Cat on the Dovrefjell

A year later Halvor was out in the woods at midday of Christmas Eve, gathering wood for the holidays, for he expected the trolls again. As he was chopping, he heard a voice shouting from the woods, 'Halvor! Halvor!'

'Yes?' said Halvor.

'Do you still have that big cat?'

'Yes,' said Halvor. 'She's lying at home under the stove, and what's more, she now has seven kittens, far bigger and fiercer than she is herself.'

'Then, we'll never come to your place again,' shouted the troll in the woods, and since that time the trolls have never eaten their Yule porridge with Halvor on the Dovrefjell.

FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY

A Christmas Party and a Wedding

Translated by Ronald Meyer

The other day I saw a wedding . . . but no! I'd better tell you about the Christmas party. The wedding was nice; I liked it very much, but the other event was better. I don't know how it was that I recalled that Christmas party as I watched the wedding. This is what happened. Exactly five years ago, on New Year's Eve, I was invited to a children's party. The person who invited me was a certain well-known businessman with connections, a circle of acquaintance and intrigues, so that one might think that the children's party was a pretext for the parents to get together and talk about some interesting matters in an innocent, casual and extemporaneous way. I was an outsider; I didn't have any business matters whatsoever, and therefore I spent the evening rather left to my own devices. There was another gentleman as well who seemed to be neither kith nor kin, but who, like me, had chanced upon this bit of family happiness . . . He was the first to catch my eye. He was a tall, thin man, quite serious, and quite decently dressed. But it was obvious that he was in no mood for celebrations and family happiness: he would walk over to some corner, immediately stop smiling and knit his bushy black brows. Apart from the host, he didn't know a single soul at the party. It was obvious that he was terribly bored, but that he was valiantly playing the part of the thoroughly entertained and happy man to the very end. I learned afterwards that this was a certain gentleman from the provinces who had some sort of crucial, puzzling business in the capital, who had brought a letter of recommendation to our host, and whom our host was patronizing by no means *con amore* and who had been invited to the children's party as a courtesy. They didn't play cards with him, they didn't offer him cigars, no one struck up a conversation with him, recognizing from afar, perhaps,

A Christmas Party and a Wedding

the bird by its feathers and, therefore, my gentleman was forced to stroke his side whiskers all evening just so he had something to do with his hands. The side whiskers indeed were quite handsome. But he stroked them so very zealously that looking at him, one might very well think that first just the side whiskers had been brought into the world, and then later the gentleman was attached to them in order to stroke them.

Apart from this figure, who was taking part in the family happiness of our host (who had five chubby boys), I liked one other gentleman. But he was a completely different sort of character. This was a personage. His name was Yulian Mastakovich. Just one glance was enough to see that he was an honoured guest and that he was on the same terms with the host as the host was with the gentleman stroking his side whiskers. The host and hostess showered him with compliments, waited on him, made sure he had something to drink, pampered him, brought their guests to him to be introduced, but didn't take him to be introduced to anybody. I noticed that our host's eyes began to sparkle with tears when Yulian Mastakovich observed in regard to the evening that rarely did he spend his time in such a delightful fashion. I became somewhat terrified in the presence of such a personage and therefore, after admiring the children for a bit, I left for the small drawing room, which was completely empty, and sat down in the hostess's flowery arbour that took up almost half of the whole room.

The children were all unbelievably sweet and flatly refused to behave like *grown-ups*, despite the exhortations of their governesses and doting mothers. They stripped bare the entire Christmas tree in a flash, down to the last candy, and had already managed to break half of the toys before they found out which one was meant for whom. Particularly winsome was one boy, with dark eyes and curly hair, who kept wanting to shoot me with his wooden gun. But his sister attracted more attention than anyone, a girl about eleven years old, charming as a little cherub, quiet, thoughtful, pale, with big, pensive, prominent eyes. The children had somehow hurt her feelings, and so she had come into the same drawing room where I was sitting and busied herself in the corner – with her doll. The guests were respectfully pointing out a certain rich tax-farmer, her father, and somebody remarked in a whisper that 300,000 roubles had already been set aside for her dowry. I turned around to cast a glance at

those who were intrigued by this circumstance, and my glance fell on Yulian Mastakovich, who, with his hands clasped behind his back and his head inclined a bit to one side, seemed to be listening with special attention to the idle chatter of these gentlemen. Afterwards I could not but marvel at the wisdom of our hosts in distributing the children's presents. The little girl who already possessed a dowry of 300,000 roubles received the most expensive doll. Then came the presents which decreased in value in accordance with the decrease in rank of the parents of these happy children. Finally, the last child, a boy of about ten years old, a skinny, little, freckled redhead, received only a little book of stories that expounded on the grandeur of nature, the tears of emotion, and so forth, without pictures and even without a single vignette. He was the son of a poor widow, the governess of our hosts' children, a boy who was extremely cowed and frightened. He was dressed in a jacket made out of some cheap nankeen. After receiving his book, he hovered for a long time near the other toys; he wanted terribly to play with the other children, but he didn't dare; it was clear that he sensed and understood his position. I like to observe children very much. Their first manifestation of independence is extremely interesting. I noticed that the little red-haired boy was so tempted by the other children's expensive toys, in particular the theatre in which he very definitely wanted to play a part, that he made up his mind to wheedle his way in. He smiled and started to play with the other children, he gave away his apple to a pudgy little boy who already had a lot of presents tied up in his handkerchief, and he had even undertaken giving a ride on his back to another boy, just so he wouldn't be chased away from the theatre. But a minute later some troublemaker thrashed him good. The child didn't dare cry. Then the governess, his mother, appeared and ordered him not to bother the other children who were playing. The child went into the same drawing room as the girl. She welcomed him and the two of them quite diligently set about dressing the expensive doll.

I had already been sitting for half an hour in the ivy arbour and had almost dozed off listening to the faint murmur of the red-haired boy and the beauty with a dowry of 300,000 as they busied themselves with the doll, when suddenly Yulian Mastakovich entered the room. He had taken advantage of a deplorable episode of the children quarrelling to leave the room quietly. I noticed that a minute earlier he had been talking quite

A Christmas Party and a Wedding

ardently with the papa of the future wealthy bride, with whom he had just become acquainted, about the advantages of one line of work over another. Now he was standing lost in contemplation and seemed to be counting something on his fingers.

'Three hundred . . . three hundred,' he whispered. 'Eleven . . . twelve . . . thirteen and so forth. Sixteen – five years. Let's say four per cent interest – 12 times 5 equals 60, and on that 60 . . . well, let's say, for five years in all – four hundred. Yes! That's it . . . But he won't settle for four per cent, the swindler! He might get eight or even ten per cent. Well, let's say five hundred, five hundred thousand, at the very least, that's for certain; well, and what's left over can go towards the glad rags for the trousseau, hmm . . .'

His contemplation concluded, he blew his nose and was about to leave the room, when he suddenly glanced at the little girl and came to a stop. He didn't see me behind the pots of greenery. He seemed to be extremely agitated. Either his calculations were having their effect on him, or something else, but he rubbed his hands and couldn't stand still. This agitation increased to *nec plus ultra*, when he came to a stop and cast another, decisive glance at the future bride. He was on the verge of moving forward, but had a look around first. Then, on tiptoe, as though he were feeling guilty, he started to approach the child. He walked up with a little smile, bent down and kissed her on the head. Not expecting an assault, she cried out in fear.

'And what are you doing here, dear child?' he asked in a whisper, looking around and patting her on the cheek.

'We're playing . . .'

'What, with him?' Yulian Mastakovich looked askance at the boy.

'And you, my dear boy, should go into the ballroom,' he said to him.

The boy kept silent and looked at him with his eyes wide-open. Yulian Mastakovich again took a look around and again bent down towards the girl.

'And what is that you have, a dolly, dear child?' he asked.

'A dolly,' the girl answered, knitting her brow and quailing a bit.

'A dolly . . . And do you know, dear child, what your dolly is made of?'

'No, I don't . . .'

the girl answered in a whisper, looking down at the ground.

'Why, it's made out of rags, my darling. My dear boy, you should go to the ballroom and be with your playmates,' Yulian Mastakovich said, after casting a stern look at the child. The girl and boy knitted their brows and grabbed hold of each other. They didn't want to be separated.

'And do you know why they gave you this dolly?' Yulian Mastakovich asked, lowering his voice more and more.

'No, I don't.'

'Because you were a sweet and well-behaved child all week long.'

Then Yulian Mastakovich, unable to contain his agitation, took a look around and, lowering his voice more and more, asked finally in an inaudible voice that faltered with agitation and impatience:

'And will you love me, my dear girl, when I come to visit your parents?'

Having said this Yulian Mastakovich wanted to kiss the sweet girl one more time, but the red-haired boy, seeing that she was on the verge of tears, clasped her by the hands and started to whimper in complete sympathy with her. Yulian Mastakovich became angry in earnest.

'Get out, get out of here, get out!' he said to the little boy. 'Go to the ballroom! Run along to your playmates!'

'No, don't! You get out of here,' the girl said, 'leave him alone, leave him alone!' she said, almost bursting into tears.

Someone made a noise at the door, Yulian Mastakovich took fright and immediately raised his majestic body. But the red-haired boy was even more frightened than Yulian Mastakovich; he abandoned the girl and quietly, hugging the wall, passed from the drawing room into the dining room. So as not to arouse suspicion, Yulian Mastakovich went to the dining room as well. He was as red as a crayfish, and after taking a look at himself in the mirror, he apparently became ashamed of himself. Perhaps he had become annoyed at his impetuosity and his impatience. Perhaps he was so struck by the calculation he'd made on his fingers, so tempted and inspired that, despite all his respectability and importance, he had decided to act like a little boy and take his object by storm, despite the fact that this object could not become a real object for at least another five years. I followed the estimable gentleman into the dining room and witnessed a strange sight. Yulian Mastakovich, all red with vexation and fury, was threatening the red-haired boy, who kept moving further and further away – he didn't know where to run to in his fear.

A Christmas Party and a Wedding

'Get out, what are you doing here, get out, you ne'er-do-well, get out! You're filching fruit here, are you? Filching fruit, are you? Get out, you ne'er-do-well, get out, you sniveller, get out, run along to your playmates.'

The frightened boy, having resolved on a desperate measure, tried crawling under the table. Then his persecutor, exasperated to the utmost, took out his long cambric handkerchief and started to flick it under the table at the child, who had become as quiet as quiet can be. It should be noted that Yulian Mastakovich was a bit on the heavy side. This was a man who was somewhat portly, ruddy, thickset, with a paunch, with fat thighs, in a word, as they say, a hearty fellow, as round as a little nut. He broke out into a sweat, was panting and became terribly flushed. In the end, he became almost frenzied, so great was his feeling of indignation and, perhaps (who knows?), jealousy. I doubled over with laughter. Yulian Mastakovich turned around and, all his importance notwithstanding, became thoroughly flustered. At this moment the host entered through the door opposite. The little boy crawled out from under the table and brushed off his knees and elbows. Yulian Mastakovich hurried to raise to his nose the handkerchief that he was holding by one end.

The host looked at the three of us in some bewilderment; but, as a person who knows life and looks upon it with some seriousness, he immediately made use of the fact that he had caught his guest alone.

'That's the boy, sir,' he said, after pointing out the redhead, 'about whom I had the honour to request . . .'

'What was that?' Yulian Mastakovich answered, still not fully recovered.

'The son of my children's governess,' the host continued in a tone befitting a request, 'a poor woman, a widow, the wife of an honest official; and therefore . . . Yulian Mastakovich, if it were possible . . .'

'Oh no, no,' Yulian Mastakovich hurriedly cried out, 'no, forgive me, Filipp Alexeyevich, that's quite impossible, sir. I've made enquiries: there aren't any vacancies, and if there were, there would already be ten candidates a great deal more entitled to it than he . . . What a pity, what a pity . . .'

'A pity, sir,' the host repeated, 'the boy is modest, quiet . . .'

'A big mischief-maker, from what I've seen,' Yulian Mastakovich

answered, hysterically curling his lip, 'off with you, boy, why are you standing there, run along to your playmates!' he said, addressing the child.

Here, it seems, he couldn't restrain himself and he shot a glance at me with one eye. I also could not restrain myself and began to laugh right in his face. Yulian Mastakovich turned around at once and asked the host rather distinctly so that I should hear it, who that strange young man was. They started to converse in whispers and left the room. I then saw how Yulian Mastakovich shook his head warily as he listened to the host.

Having laughed my fill, I returned to the ballroom. There the great man, surrounded by the fathers and mothers of families, by the hostess and host, was heatedly explaining something to a lady to whom he had just been introduced. The lady was holding by the hand the little girl with whom, ten minutes ago, Yulian Mastakovich had had the scene in the drawing room. Now he was singing the praises of and going into raptures over the beauty, talents, grace and good manners of the dear little child. He was conspicuously playing up to the mother. The mother was listening to him practically with tears of rapture. The father's lips had a smile on them. The host rejoiced in the outpouring of universal joy. Even all the guests sympathized, even the children's games were stopped so as not to interfere with the conversation. The very air was suffused with reverence. I then heard how the mother of the interesting little girl, touched to the bottom of her heart, requested in the most elegant language that Yulian Mastakovich do her the particular honour of favouring their home with his precious acquaintance; I heard the genuine rapture with which Yulian Mastakovich accepted the invitation and later how the guests as they were breaking up to go their separate ways, as dictated by decorum, sang the heart-swelling praises of the tax-farmer, the tax-farmer's wife, the little girl and Yulian Mastakovich in particular.

'Is that gentleman married?' I asked, almost aloud, to one of my acquaintances who was standing closest to Yulian Mastakovich.

Yulian Mastakovich threw me a searching and spiteful glance.

'No!' answered my acquaintance, who was distressed to the very depths of his being by the blunder that I had intentionally committed . . .

Not long ago I was walking past —skaya Church; I was struck by the crowd and the throng of carriages. All around there was talk of a wedding.

A Christmas Party and a Wedding

The day was overcast, it had started to drizzle; I fought my way through the crowd into the church and saw the groom. He was a small, roundish, portly little man with a paunch, decked out to the hilt. He was running around, bustling about and giving orders. At last, word spread that the bride had arrived. I elbowed my way through the crowd and saw the marvellous beauty for whom the first spring had scarcely begun. But the beauty was pale and sad. She looked about absentmindedly; it even seemed that her eyes were red with recent tears. The classical severity of every feature of her face imparted a certain gravity and solemnity to her beauty. But through this severity and gravity, through this sadness still shined the first childish look of innocence; one sensed something utterly naive, unformed, youthful, which seemed to be silently begging for mercy.

People were saying that she had just turned sixteen. After taking a careful look at the groom, I suddenly recognized him as Yulian Mastakovich, whom I had not seen in exactly five years. I took another look at her . . . My God! I started to elbow my way out of the church as quickly as I could. In the crowd they were saying that the bride was rich, that the bride had a dowry of 500,000 . . . plus so much for glad rags for her trousseau.

'All the same, a fine bit of calculation!' I thought to myself, as I elbowed my way to the street . . .

PAUL ARÈNE

St Anthony and His Pig

Translated by J. M. Lancaster

St Anthony pushed open the door and saw in his cabin half a dozen little children who had come up from the village, in spite of the storm, to bring him some honey and nuts, dainties which the good hermit allowed himself to enjoy once a year, on Christmas Day, on account of his great age.

‘Sit around the fire, friends, and throw on two or three pine knots to make a blaze. That’s right. Now make room for Barrabas; poor, faithful Barrabas, who is so cold that his tail is all out of curl.’

The children coughed and wiped their noses, and Barrabas – for that is the real name of St Anthony’s pig – Barrabas grunted, with his feet comfortably buried in the warm ashes.

The saint threw back his hood, shook the snow from his shoulders, passed his hand over his long gray beard, all hung with little icicles, and having seated himself, began:

‘So you want me to tell you about my temptation?’

‘Yes, good St Anthony; yes, kind St Anthony.’

‘My temptation? But you know as much as I do about my temptation. It has been drawn and painted a thousand times, and you can see on my wall – God forgive me this piece of vanity – all the *prints*, old and new, dedicated to my glory and that of Barrabas; from Épinal’s sketch which costs a sou including the song, to the admirable masterpieces of Teniers, Breughel, and Callot.

‘I am sure your mothers must have taken you to the marionette theater at Luxembourg, to see my poor hermitage, just as it is here, with the chapel, the cabin, the bell hanging in the crotch of a tree, and myself at prayer, while Proserpine offers me a cup, and a host of little devils dancing at the end of a string are tormenting and terrifying poor Barrabas.