

*So she told them he
three tales older than
memory—old as the
hills themselves.*

THE WITCHERY OF YULE

*An Iceland folk-tale of midnight crossroads and white
magic under the Christmas moon*

by

Laura Goodman Salverson

ALL the long summer nights, while the great amber sun drowsed in the northern heavens, Marta, the crofter's daughter, watched her few sheep patiently on the west bank of Little River high up in Njal's mountain. On the east bank, Rollo Bing, nephew of the Bishop and second son of Nestor Bing "The Wealthy," did like service for Peter Gils, his maternal uncle. Naturally there was neither financial need nor choice in the matter. But Herr Bauer, the great German lung specialist, had advised the mountains and it was very dull doing nothing.

Rollo did not fancy the hills stretching up into rocky pinnacles and gleaming caps of snow. Their vastness weighed upon him. Their impenetrable austerity repelled him. And, at first, the mournful bleating of the sheep kept him in constant turmoil. Dashing hither and thither, counting and calling as none but a green city lad would do. None the less he soon perceived that Girk, the tawny shepherd dog, could do all this more effectively and with less confusion. In time the bleating of the sheep melted into the sighing of the wind in the dark pines and the happy clamor of the tumbling river.

Thereafter Rollo began to see the kindlier side of the mountain; the soft green runnels and tipsy gorges, and more especially Little River that sang so delightfully through the wild plateau. He had never thought about it particularly, but now it seemed to him that this was the very place Gerda, his old nurse, must have had in mind when she told of the Hidden People and the mischievous Elves, Light and

Dark. Of course, it was not the sort of conviction a boy of fifteen brags about. But it tempted him none the less to odd fancies when the night birds set up their clatter and the sun hung like a topaz balloon over the shell pink mountains.

To tell the truth, Rollo had a secret passion none suspected, condoned lightly in the Bing household. He longed in his queer silent way to be a poet like Ivar Mattius, whose bust, smiling blandly under its crown of laurel leaves, graced the Noro Museum. What is more, he had at least a hundred lyrics, all very bad but oddly original, hidden in the bottom of the First Aid kit his mother had provided when he first went to Boarding School.

A mother whose thoughts ran to First Aid kits and a father who built and operated merchant ships would hardly fancy so useless a profession as poetry even for a second son. Hilda Bing took it for granted that Ivar, her first-born, should follow in his father's footsteps, and Nestor quite as reasonably understood that whatever Hilda chose for Rollo would be eminently fitting. She chose the ministry; not because she loved religion particularly but because the episcopal robes were so decorative. And there was really no telling how high a boy might rise who had brains and a sufficient private fortune.

But now Rollo had to spend a year in the mountains because of a miserable little spot on his right lung. Hilda Bing accepted it like something of personal insult. Her heart had been set on Rollo's entering the seminary at sixteen and seeing him ordained as the youngest of all the priests in the capital.

Rollo flung back his carefree head and laughed aloud at the thought of it. A year's freedom! A year to read and write and be as lazy as he liked! Why, he'd write an ode, he'd write an epic . . . He'd write a whole book of stuff by then!

"Ho-a-a-a Ho-a-a! Rollo Bing! Rollo Bing!"

So! thought Rollo, shaken from his reverie and jumping to his feet. Here at last was the girl who kept the sheep his uncle had warned him not to let mix with his own. For the crofter's flock was common stock and Peter Gil's government improved.

"Ho-a-a-a!" Rollo shouted back. "What do you want, Marta Kristen's daughter?"

"Ho! I do not want anything. Not I! But it is you want a sheep—a ram, in fact. It has jumped the stream at the ford and joined my flock. Ja, sure, and a bad creature it is, Rollo Bing!"

All this did not reach Rollo with the ease it is written. No, indeed. Marta must cup her hands and shout and shout and perch on a rock here and another there, always a bit nearer Little River. But for all that Rollo, racing down the opposite slope, seemed extraordinarily deaf. However

when he reached the level of the water he had concluded that Marta, though a girl, looked a pleasant young person with her sleek black braids, scarlet jumper and bobbing petticoats.

She frankly expressed what she thought of him. "Don't stand there, you redhead! Leave the dog to watch the flock. He'll do better without you. And get on to the ford; you can't cross there, my grand city lordling!"

Usually, Rollo's was the mildest temper. But now, somehow every red hair on his head awakened to its ancient heritage. He bristled like an angry dog, grew hot and cold and prickly with a burst of delightfully primitive masculinity.

Not being able to think of anything sufficiently crushing, he hooted contemptuously and began tearing off his clothes.

Little Marta's natural resentment at the rich Rollo and his troublesome ram met in frightened admiration. He wasn't such a city booby! Eja! No, he was going to swim the river. He was! . . . he . . . Oh! Oh! But he didn't know the stream as she did. He didn't know that it was full of pools where the current dragged one down. Full of Black Elf basins . . .

"Rollo! Rollo!" she screamed, as denuded of all but braces and breeches he plunged like an otter into the stream. "Go back, Rollo! Go back! You're heading for the Black Elf basin—the biggest and the worst! Please, Rollo, go back and I'll run to the ford to meet you."

But Rollo pretended not to hear. He was a good swimmer. The water was cold but he'd often known colder, and the river wasn't more than a good-sized stream at best. He'd show that little crofter's upstart that a Bing was something more than just a city name. The saucy little baggage!

THEN the queerest thing happened. The water seemed all at once to take on the malignity of tugging, twisting, dragging hands! What was that foolishness she'd said . . . Black Elf's basin? Black Elves—rot. Just the same, he could almost feel the texture of their little jealous fingers—black hairy fingers gripping his legs, pinching his calves. Herre Gud! The harder he swam the less speed he made. Now he could picture the yawning black basin into whose depths he must shortly sink . . .

On the shore little Marta watched nervously. Would he cross far enough to the right? At first she thought so and admired the long swift strokes and seal-like dart of his slim young body. Hola! He was a fine lad—city or no city. And not one to scare with words. Eja! "Rollo! Rollo! To the right! To the right!" He hadn't heard her. She saw the water catch him like a swirling disc and throw him backward.

Not another word did little Marta waste. Like a flash she ran to the hut hollowed out of the hill by her father for shelter in bad weather and returned with a great rope. This she quickly cast round a huge boulder and then, flinging off her impeding petticoats, she leaped into the stream as agile and swift as a Valkyrie turned mermaid.

"To the right! To the right, Rollo!" she shouted; "don't give up! I'll throw you the rope in a minute. Just a minute, Rollo! Don't let the Black Elves get you!"

A little later they both sat upon the pebbly shore where their tired bodies had lain full length and considered each other speculatively.

"You're a great girl," said Rollo, "I didn't know girls had that much sense."

Marta began squeezing the water from her heavy hair and cotton shift. "You're not so bad yourself, Rollo . . . I thought the same of city boys. Come on, let's build a fire. I've coffee to warm and crullers and good pickled mutton."

Over their fire Rollo grew unusually talkative. He not only confided to Marta his distastes of the ministry, but told her majestically that his mind was made up to be a poet. Oh, a very great poet!

Eja! Little Marta clapped her hands turning her sea-blue eyes on him adoringly. "It is quite as you say, Rollo. Of priests we have no end. But poets are scarce as Christmas roses. Of course, you will write about our little Hidden People—the goblins and the elves, and outlander giants . . . Of course you will, for no one has ever written about our mountain, and that is very queer, for of all mountains it is richest in fairy lore."

Rollo stuffed a huge cruller into his mouth and nodded sagely. "Just wait, Marta Kristen's daughter," said he, as if the idea were of long standing and not born of the moment. "Just wait! A few years more and the whole world will know all about your mountain!"

Illustrated by
Christine L. Chisholm

But Marta was a melodramatic soul. From her blouse she drew a little locket, hung against the velvet of her white neck by a piece of string. "Rollo, this holds a strand of my dead mother's hair. Golden, it is, like the sun in mid heaven—not black like mine." Here she bent close, her little face aflame with intensity. "And when she cut it off to make a Christmas gift for me the year before she died, she stood in a fairy ring. It was Christmas Eve, Rollo, and she had brought a little cake and a porringer of clotted cream for the Hidden People . . . Eja! She cut off her golden hair knowing well that a hundred tiny eyes were fixed upon her. 'Queen of the Hidden People,' said she, 'I bless you in the name of God Who, doubtless, one day, will

remove the ban upon you. And I bless all Eve's Hidden children everywhere and give them joy the midnight hour of their freedom. And now put a goodwill upon this lock of hair which my daughter will wear upon her heart hereafter.' Eja, Rollo, I was not there, but she told Granny Elspeth that no sooner had she uttered her blessing than a soft wind sprang up, gentle as the breezes of summer and in it she heard both happy tears and laughter. Just for a moment it seemed as if the snow faded and the green of spring covered the place, and the lock of hair lying on the rock at her feet glowed like a rope of sunbeams. So my mother knew the Hidden People had put a spell upon it. A white magic, Rollo, to work good because of my mother's kindness."

Rollo was certainly not unimpressed, but a broad streak of Bing practicality led him to answer bluntly: "But she died within a year, Marta . . . Was that good magic?"

Marta's blue eyes opened wide. "My mother was too beautiful to be a crofter's wife," said she simply. "Besides, the magic was for me, Rollo. Eja, I have made only one wish so far, but come Christmas Eve I shall make another. I shall make one for you, Rollo Bing, and the poems you will write of our mountain."

Rollo could not have explained what made him do it and he was horribly ashamed immediately afterwards. "I will come with you to the Wishing Ring, Marta. I will! I swear it!" And, as I said, before either of them dreamt what he was about, he kissed her.

"Tist!" Little Marta turned quite scarlet. "Rollo Bing, you better take that mean ram back across the stream. It's time he went, the ugly glutton."

TIME moved more pleasantly after that. Rollo might not cross the stream so very often, but the ford made jesting possible and before long they had a system of signals that worked admirably. Then there were the rainy days, always so dreary heretofore, when the sheep hugged shelter and were in no danger of straying. Then, indeed, might Rollo cross the stream and take pleasure in Marta's hospitality. Her coffee always so much better than his own, and her folk tales endless.

One such day was destined to remain indelibly stamped on Rollo's memory. An unusually mean day for this time of year. Even Marta shivered beside the ling fire and wished herself down in the valley where the mists were heavy but less biting cold. And then, just when things looked the blackest, didn't Granny Elspeth appear over the shoulder of the hill, for all the world like some mysterious witch woman.

Eja! Little Marta jumped to her feet and hallooed wildly, bobbing up and down like a popinjay. "Ho-a-a-a! Ho-a-a-a! Granny! Granny! Come with God!"

And Granny lifted her stick and shook it cheerfully, much as to say, Do I not walk with God continually, foolish one?

In the hut the children made a great fuss over the old woman. Whereupon, though she said nothing as yet, she thought to herself that this Rollo she'd heard so much about wasn't half bad. Not half bad for a Bing, that is.

"Granny, dear," began Marta, untying the old lady's sheephide shoes to dry them before the fire, "what brought you really? An errand or just fairy magic?"

"Magic enough," said Granny, turning toward Rollo and holding out a wrinkled hand. "So you're the Bing lad, are you? Well, peace to you and long days. Nu, da, how is the sickness healing, young one?"

Rollo had almost forgotten the threatening spot. He flushed to his ears, grinning guiltily: "Very well, Fru, thank you."

"Tish! Tish! Call me Granny, lad—just Granny." Old Elspeth smiled, highly pleased at his courtesy, every wrinkle a hill of joy in her healthy peasant face. "Ja, well, Marta Kristen's daughter," she resumed stentoriously, "magic enough brought me. Your father has got a berth with the fish merchant Jergens. Part time on the sea, part time at the post."

"How fine!" cried little Marta. "Now he will have money to jingle in his pockets like the Provost himself, and shoes of black leather . . . Eja, but of the farm, Granny, and the sheep?"

"Spare us! Since when have women been less useful on a farm than a baggage man?" demanded the old lady sharply. "Tish! you are young, Marta, to know so little. But, truth to tell, the farm is scarcely better than a square of rock and the sooner one finds a fool to buy it the better. To be frank, the magic that brought me out on a day like this wasn't the news of Kristen's good fortune. Nay, da. Hark now, little madcap: Come New Year, if all goes well, you are to go to the village to begin your catechism. It's high time you had some Christian instruction, you wild young heathen."

Marta did a hornpipe. "Eja! How fine, how fine! And shall I have a white dress [Continued on page 37]



"Hear me now, all you Hidden Children of Eve!" he cried gaily. "This is my own true love."



The Witchery of Yule

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and store slippers with buckles? Say yes, Granny, say yes. Say . . ."

All at once like a cloud across the sun her gaiety faded. And, whirlwind that she was, Marta flung herself into the old woman's arms. "Granny, Granny, I shall have to leave my Wishing Ring. My mother's Wishing Ring. The Wishing Ring of the dear Hidden People who make good magic for me."

"Tish! Have sense, Marta. How do you know this isn't part of their magic? Do you think they want you to grow up ignorant as a bad elf or goblin? Marta Kristen's daughter, you know better. Now hurry with the coffee before my heart freezes above my empty stomach."

WHILE they ate, old Elspeth plied Rollo with questions, and such was her witchery that she, too, soon learned the secret of his poetic longings. "Good, good!" said she, "Now listen. I will tell you three tales older than the oldest inhabitants' memory stretches—old as the hills themselves. When you are back at school you can write them into fine words. And, mark me—for I have the gift at times—fine things will come of it."

So she told him the three tales older than memory, old as the hills themselves. When she finished, his heart beat like a gong in his breast and something jubilant as sparkling wine soared in his mind.

"Eja! That is very fine, Granny," sighed little Marta jealously. "But now tell him how the Hidden People came to be, for that is the best of all."

The old lady crossed herself piously. "God forgive her! It was our Mother Eve's pride did it. After the Fall the good God was by no means so unkind as some would have us believe. Not He! In the cool of the evening He oftimes visited His wilful children. Admiring the work of their hands, their crude garden, and makeshift house.

"One such pleasant evening when Mother Eve had only washed and combed the half of her noisy brood, she thought she heard the Blessed Lord laugh nearby. Tish! Poor Eve straightway fell into a flutter. Six of her little ones were clean and shiny from romp over the young earth. It was more than she could bear to have the Lord God see them thus and think her but a slack mother. With a swish of a willow broom she sent the six dirty rascals to cover.

"When the Lord God drew near she stood surrounded by her six shiny children, Cain and Abel pushed well to the fore, her face wreathed in nervous smiles. Eja! believe it or not, the Blessed Lord had a twinkle in His eye when He looked at her. But she, foolish woman, saw nothing so shamed as she was of being behindhand in her duties.

"'Daughter, is all well with thee?' the Great God spoke softly.

"Yet our foolish mother Eve nodded: 'All well, Lord,' said she.

"Still smiling, God spoke again: 'Is it so, daughter? And where, then, are all thy children?'

"But Eve, alas, answered breathlessly: 'Lord, they are all here.'

"Eja! Believe me, the Lord God has scant patience with a fool.

"'As thou sayest, so be it,' He answered

sternly. 'What thou hast hidden, Mother Eve, let be forever hidden!'

"There, then, my young ones, that is how the Hidden People came into being. May the ban be shortened!'

"Oh, but . . ." began Rollo, "they were innocent . . ."

"Tish! Put it in your verse, Rollo Bing, don't pester me with it . . . But as to that, the Hidden People aren't so badly off. 'Tis we, ourselves, might envy them, I'm thinking."

When Granny left at the lifting of the storm, Marta turned to Rollo: "Now you must come to make the wish with me at Christmas."

Rollo snorted, "Haven't I said I would. Well, then, I will."

THREE years later, as Granny had predicted, Rollo Bing surprised his family by winning the Thorvaldson award for the best essay and original poem composed by a junior in Saint Olaf's seminary. Because of the beautiful bronze medal the headmaster pinned on Rollo's breast, Hilda Bing forgave him. But, as she told him on the drive home, it gave her quite a jolt. Indeed it quite disturbed her. Besides, it seemed such a trivial thing to give a medal for in a seminary so exclusive!

But Marta thought very differently when, with Rollo's letter clutched to her breast, she danced in upon Granny Elspeth in their new little house in Gilbrow village.

"Granny! Granny! He did it. He wrote your tales. That is, he hinted at them And he won the prize, Granny."

"Humph!" grunted Granny, pulling down her spectacles from the peak of her kerchief. "What would he get, then, if he went past hinting? Let me see it, young one."

The essay interested her little enough. There was such a sober Bing recititude about it. The verse was another matter. "Omens Three," he had called it, and the old lady read with pleasure the rapid sketch of what a foolish city dweller might call peasant superstition.

*"Cross yourself, child,
Quickly, quickly!
Cross yourself quickly!
For the Goblin in the Green Glade
Has a sharp sickle and a black
spade.
Cross yourself once, quickly,
quickly!"*

*"Cross yourself, child,
Quickly, quickly!
Cross yourself quickly!
For the Grey Men on the Upland
Heath
Have a Witching Ring for a funeral
wreath.
Cross yourself twice, quickly,
quickly!"*

*"Cross yourself, child,
Quickly, quickly!
Cross yourself quickly!
For the sun goes down in a burst of
red
And a raven circles overhead.
Cross yourself thrice, quickly,
quickly!"*

"Ho!" came Granny's final summing up. "He will go far that one. But mind, Marta



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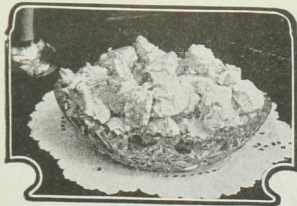
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Kristen's daughter, the Bings are a proud lot. Better not get to dreaming foolishly."

MARTA was very conscientious. Doubtless her thoughts of Rollo continued platonic and sensible. Nevertheless, it was for academic news she first looked whenever she opened the weekly paper. And, with alarming frequency—alarming, that is, for his parents—Rollo's name appeared in connection with some composition or other. At last it got so bad that Nestor Bing must visit Saint Olaf's himself to interview the headmaster. Whereupon that much-over-estimated greybeard proved himself so lacking in sensibility and honor due a Bing as to congratulate Rollo's parents on the son who most certainly would redeem his name from mediocrity. And—er—ahem—the shadow of trade!

Nestor Bing appeared to accept this with tolerable good grace. "Yes—yes," said he, "ah—yes!" Then launched into a prophecy of the fall elections.

But, come winter, instead of making his usual Christmas donation to the seminary, he let it be known he intended to fête Gilsbrow village instead. In Gilsbrow, Nestor's fishing ships added considerably to his precious trade!

Eja! Young Marta danced in circles at the news. "How fine, how fine! Granny Elspeth, was there ever such news as that?"

No wonder. Not a girl could vie with her in grace and grandeur by Christmas eve. Tish! Granny chuckled. There was a thousand, thousand extra stitches in her new gown and the Elves alone knew how many foolish ribbons! Indeed, as the factor whispered to her father, she was the pick of the village, and no mistake, with her shining black hair and soft luminous eyes. Ho, yes! A girl to twist the hearts of the lads, was Marta Kristen's daughter!

But Marta made short work of her lumbering admirers. And, to her father's warning not to get highheaded, she laughed merrily and mercilessly. Eja! She had a plan, had Marta. She was studying with the village schoolmaster. One day she, too, would teach in the Uplands; teach the little children in lonely mountain places.

That, very likely, was her sincere aim and sole purpose. Yet, somehow, it detracted nothing from her happy interest in the coming Bing festival.

What a time they had! At nine the feasting was over and the dancing began. What a whirling and twirling! Two mad, glad hours of it. And then the torchlight procession to the church on the hillside. It was to this Marta looked forward with high beating heart. Eja! Only the Elf Dance at New Year could equal it. Pretty girls laughing and joking, lifted their candles high, and like many-colored butterflies floated over the clean white fields. After they sped their eager lovers. If you reached the church with candles still burning, luck was yours throughout the coming year—luck in love, that is. And should a lover prove bold enough, he might claim a kiss and none thought badly of it.

Marta had not said so, but she was sure Rollo would find her in time for the procession. But the procession formed and left and no Rollo appeared. Several jaunty lads stopped at the lighted porch of Granny's little house but Marta laughed them away again.

So the hour dragged until the quarter bell rang, warning all merry-makers everywhere that the midnight hour drew near. The hour of their Lord's nativity when roistering must cease and brotherly love alone abide. Four bells, ringing slowly and solemnly. Lay down the fiddle, villagers. Set aside the alehorn. There is glory in the heavens and glory on the hills. Light the candles, villagers. Red candles and white for the Little Blessed Christ child. In every window and loft set a light burning. For this is the hour the Star stood highest over Bethlehem and the Little Lord Jesus first smiled upon His Mother.

Muttering to herself, old Granny went to the window with her holy candles. "Ho! Ho! What is this?" she exclaimed sharply.

"Marta, my young one, put a bright face on you, for as I live . . ."

She got no farther, for the door opened and in dashed Rollo, rimed with frost and wreathed in smiles and raising a great hue and cry. "Marta! Marta! Put on your coat swiftly. Swiftly, darling, there's just time to reach the crossroads before the bells toll twelve."

"Ho hum, darling!" chuckled granny when the door slammed behind them. "Darling! God bless me if Nestor Bing hasn't hatched a swan in his duckpond! A wild swan with a wing for flying! Eja, I might as well leave out the raisin cake after all. The crossroads are full of magic, no doubt, but the north wind gives an edge to appetite notwithstanding."

Out on the white highway Rollo's horses sped like deer. Yet now they were alone, Marta sat straight and prim in her side of the cutter and Rollo's young face had set in stern, hard lines. Marta's heart began to beat strangely. What was in his mind? What had happened? Why hadn't he been at his father's festival, sitting at the head table as he ought; leading the first quadrille; heading the procession?

The sleigh swung like a whip into the mountain road—the old road that followed Little River up into the Saetter places—swung like a whip and stood still. Now Rollo looked at her oddly, she thought. His light grey eyes hard in the white moonlight, his whole expression out of keeping with the playful excursion. Abrupt, he flung back the fur robes and leaped out.

"Quick, Marta!" He tried to make his voice gay but there was a queer strained note in it. Still, he said it again—that loveliest thing: "Quick, darling! We can't reach our Wishing Ring but a crossroads at midnight is almost as good. Jump, darling, and let's make our promises with the little Hidden People for witness and friends."

What did it matter that Marta thought him quite mad? He was Rollo. What he said was the Law and the Prophets to her. Whatever he wished to promise she was eager to encourage and believe.

But now Rollo had no new poem to offer the Hidden people in proof of his ambition and faith. Instead he took from his pocket a small purple box and laid it open on the snow-mantled boulder that marked the crossroads. Marta's heart gave a wild lurch and settled into heavy labored beating. Eja, what was this? A bracelet of little stones that gleamed like chained stars. And, inside the flaming circlet a plain gold band . . .

Soft along the air came the first slow pealing of the midnight bells. Marta and Rollo crossed themselves. Then for the first time Rollo laughed charmingly, boyishly, and, without a by-your-leave caught her in his arms.

"Hear me now, all you Hidden Children of Eve!" he cried gaily. "This is my own true love. To her and the magic world of letters my life is henceforth given. Forever and ever, Amen!"

"Rollo! Rollo!" Marta tried to stop him. Eja, tried . . . every time she opened her mouth to speak he kissed her. Distracted, she tore herself loose. "Rollo Bing! For shame! For shame! Are you quite mad? Have you forgotten . . ."

"The Bings?" he finished for her. "No, darling, no. But I've sworn them, so to speak, for the time being. That's what made me late. I had to visit a certain newspaper office where I've signed a contract." He laughed again heartily. "You perceive, darling, how hard the Bing dies. I signed a contract before making the poetic gesture of cutting myself off from episcopal honors."

Marta was thrilled, horrified, and completely won. Nevertheless, she was about to rebuke him when a sweet familiar sound diverted every thought. "Rollo, listen!"

Down from Njal's mountain, echoes wakened by the bells, tumbled like elfin music, rising and falling in strange cadences caught from distant peaks and gorges to melt away in soft ripples.

"Eja, I hear them—those the fairy people. They laugh at us, Rollo. They are not displeased."

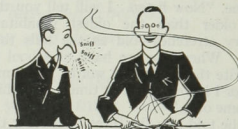
Rollo picked up the purple box. "Give

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me your hand, Marta. So! The bracelet is yours now, but the other . . . well, the other you shall have when my apprenticeship at letters is over—or shall we say fairly begun."

Marta looked at her highhanded lover in sober adoration. Then, mischief kindling in her face, she retorted: "Look you, my red-headed lordling. The sea of Letters may prove no better swimming than Little River. In which case I have another rope ready. Eja, Rollo Bing, while you write your masterpieces I can teach to keep the kettle boiling."

Then, though she knew nothing of it, she repeated the luckless headmaster's honest sentiment:

"The Hidden People know, Rollo, for they

have heard me wish it five Christmasses already: Rollo Bing will one day lift a good name to lasting glory!"

"Marta! Marta!" Poor Rollo all at once poor tonguetied. "Oh, Marta—kiss me just once . . . before we descend into the valley where the long road waits us."

"Eja, Rollo," Marta teased him, "who would have thought a city lad had so much sense! Bend low. Bend low, my proud redhead."

Down in the valley Granny lit another candle for the front window. Saw that the kettle steamed furiously and shook her head.

"Nu, da, the crossroads hold magic indeed! Ja, well, the longer the fast, the sweeter the feast. Thanks be, there's crullers aplenty and good Yule bread."



Their First Christmas Eve

Continued from page 4

easy to the others. Tommy's arm helped, but she knew he was eager to get ahead, in the van of the party where he belonged. She closed her eyes to shut out the snowglare and trudged along blindly until she felt the arm tighten about her.

"Rejoice," Tommy exclaimed. "We're here!"

After a short rest, he knelt in the snow to adjust the stiff new straps on her skis and she enjoyed the feeling of dependence even while she sensed guiltily that she should be more like Sally and the other women who competently fastened their own. Another point where south and north were at variance, she noted pensively.

For half an hour she struggled hopefully to play up, though she was absurd on skis, but at the end of that time she was exhausted and told Tommy so. He spread a slicker for her on the snow, tucked a blanket around her, ruffled her hair, and was off. In his long, free strides she thought she read a certain relief. Resolutely she shut out the idea that he would not have left her so in the days of his breath-taking courtship, down in Georgia. It was his energy that had won her heart then; what right had she to complain of that very exuberance now?

It developed that he was the ablest skier among them, possibly excepting Sally. Poor dear, no wonder he loved these trips! He was superb as he flashed down the slopes, jumping and turning in mid-air. On every return he stopped to joke with her; to find if she were comfortable; to tease her; to warm her hands.

"Like it, little girl?" he asked anxiously. And because he was so enthusiastic, she had to smile and drawl, "Sure 'nough." She could not tell him how different her dreams of this first Christmas together had been.

The hours wore along slowly. She was grateful that sunshine took the tang out of the air. Occasionally she walked around a bit, but most of the time she sat on the slicker, watching Tommy. Through the long afternoon she cheered herself with thought of the evening. No one could take him from her then! Half defiantly she decided that she would wear the blue frock after all. Let the others stay in hiking togs if they chose. She sighed briefly, and sought out Tommy. There he was, high up against the snow, and the flaunting orange scarf beside him belonged to Sally.

At last the sun, a great ball of red fire, was rolling down the chilly slope of the sky. Mary Lou rose, brushed off the snow,

stamped her feet to warm them, set her cap at a jaunty angle. Her eyes were shining. The afternoon had ended, and ahead was Christmas Eve.

On the return to the Lodge, she trotted beside Tommy, letting him carry her skis while she tried to keep up with his effortless forward glide. Again she felt sure of him he laughed down at her and quite shamelessly held her hand.

The rest called back and forth through the crisp sunset, challenging and chattering. Sally Lynn sped past down a slope. Mary Lou sighed contentedly and slipped her hand farther within the shelter of Tommy's. At the base of the hill, Sally turned expertly and came to a stop. "Great guns, what a snowcrust," she exulted. "Tommy, I'm going to beat you at your own Telemarck turn tonight!"

Quite suddenly and without warning the joy went out of the sunset for Mary Lou. For an instant she felt hurt and tearful, like a child who has reached trustingly for candy and finds it taken away. Then she grasped apprehensively at her hopes as they faded.

"It's going to be a great evening in front of the fireplace, honey boy," she suggested, breathless for Tommy's answer, yet dreading it.

"Fire? Oh, we won't be in front of the fire tonight," he answered. "There's a full moon, and it's then we get our best skiing."

Mary Lou caught her breath. Tommy heard, and looked down at her with a puzzled line between his eyes. "Everybody turns out for skiing by moonlight," he explained. "It's too glorious to miss. It won't tire you, kitten, for I have a plan up my sleeve—I'm going to pull you out on a toboggan. What say? It's great sport!"

"It's Christmas Eve," she protested softly. "Tommy, I've waited all afternoon."

The puzzled line grew deeper. "Honey, if we stay in when all the crowd's skiing, everyone will think we're—high-hat."

"Let them!" she said defiantly. "What do we care what people think?"

"I forgot," he said slowly. "Guess I think everyone is as crazy about skiing as—Sally is."

His voice was impersonal, but if he had tried to hurt he could not have done so more effectively. Mary Lou's day-dream faded, giving place to a dull ache. Tears sprang to her eyes, but she shook them away angrily. So he was comparing her to Sally? Criticizing her inability on skis? Because she loved him and he had hurt her, she felt a sudden desire to give him pain. She took

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