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Little Maid Hildegarde

Maud Lindsay

One evening Little Maid Hildegarde's father came home with wonderful news; the knights were coming to town. He had heard it as he came from the forest where he cut wood all day and he hurried every step of the way home to tell Hildegarde and her mother.

"They are on the king's business and will be at the Church Square tomorrow morning at the hour of ten. Everybody in town will be there to see them. Old Grandmother Grey is going to ask them to ride in search of her little lamb that has gone astray; and the mayor will tell them of the wolves that come in the winter. The good knights are always glad to help," he said.

Little Maid Hildegarde knew all about the knights. Her father was never tired of telling, or she of hearing, how they fought and killed the fierce dragon that had troubled the people of the border; and put out the forest fires in the time of the great drought and fed the hungry when the famine was in the land. And yet with all of their great deeds they were merry men, not too proud to sing at a feast or play with a child.

And many an evening, though Hildegarde was growing to be a great girl, her mother sat by her bed to sing a song that she had sung to her when she was a babe in the cradle:

"Hush, my baby, do not cry,
Five brave knights go riding by.
One is dressed in bonny blue;
He's the leader, strong and true.
One is clad from head to toe
In an armor white as snow.
"One in crimson bright is drest,
With a star upon his breast.
One in gold and one in green,
Cloth of gold and satin sheen.
Hush, my baby, do not cry,
Five brave knights go riding by."

Oh, how Hildegarde had longed to see those splendid riders! And now at last she was to have her heart's desire. It seemed almost too good to be true.

"Shall we start to town as soon as the new day comes?" she asked.



"Just as soon as the cows are taken to the pasture, and the little chicks are fed," said her mother; and the little maid went to bed well satisfied.

But alas, for Hildegarde and her hopes! The morning sun had scarcely shone when her mother awoke with a terrible pain in her head, and her father slipped on his way to the barn and sprained his foot so he could not walk. And there was no one to take the child to the Church Square. No, not even a neighbor, for Hildegarde and her mother and father lived apart from every one else, and the wood that is called Enchanted lay between them and the town.

There was no help for it. Hildegarde knew herself, without a word from any one, that she could not go; but as she ran about the house to wait on them, she heard her mother and father talking.

"It is not for the pain in my face that I grieve," said the good mother; "but for the disappointment of our little maid."

"Aye," said the father, "I would bear my hurt, and more too, willingly, if only she might see the gallant knights."

And when Hildegarde heard what they said she made haste to wipe away the tears that threatened to roll down her cheeks, and went about her work with a pleasant face.

All day long she was busy for there were the cows to take to the pasture, and the little chicks to feed, and the eggs to gather; but at sunset her tasks were done, and with her doll in her arms she sat in the doorway of the house and looked away toward the town, the towers of which just showed above the Enchanted Wood.

Highest of all was the spire of the church that stood in the square where the knights had been; and as Hildegarde watched it change from grey to gold in the sunset glow, she thought of them and wondered where they had gone when their business was done.

Some day they would come again and then she should surely see them, her father said; and already she had begun to look forward to that time.

"Perhaps they will come when the wolves do in the winter," she said to herself; but scarcely had she spoken when through an opening in the wood she spied a horseman riding at a stately pace. Behind him came another, and another till she had counted five—five brave knights! Yes, there they came with prancing steeds

and shining shields, and splendid clothes!

One bore a banner blue as the sky on a summer's day, and the next held a wee lamb close within his arms. A dragon's head hung from another's saddle, and two had bugles by their sides.

Not a word was spoken. As silently as the stars shine out at evening they passed the door where the child sat wonder-struck; and as quietly as the sun goes down at the day's end they vanished into the wood again before she could move or call. But just as the green of the last one's coat faded away into the green of the trees, Hildegarde thought she heard a strain of sweetest music!

Now there were those, and Hildegarde's mother and father were among them, who believed that the little maid, tired from her long busy day, had fallen asleep, and dreamed a beautiful dream.

But as for Hildegarde, she kept the vision in her heart alway; and when as the years went by she had little ones of her own to rock to sleep, she told them of it, and sang to them as her mother had sung to her:

"Hush, my ba-by, do not cry, Five brave knights go rid-ing by.
One is dressed in bon-ny blue; He's the lead-er, strong and true.
One is clad from head to toe In an ar-mor white as snow.
One in crim-son bright is drest, With a star up-on his breast.
One in gold and one in green, Cloth of gold and sat-in sheen.
Hush, my ba-by, do not cry, Five brave knights go rid-ing by."

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