

BRIDGET.

BRIDGET was twelve, wise for her years, a born mother. She was very happy, being in sole charge, for the time being, of a room and kitchen house, three stairs up in a Govanhill tenement. She was not exactly the sole occupant. Sleeping on the fender was Toby, the cheetie, his black coat shining in the glow of the kitchen fire. There was another. In the crib, also sleeping, was Bridget's favourite—wee Josie Colgan. The Colgans were out at a party. Bridget, who lived next close, was keeping the house for them. She was experienced and trustworthy. There was little about a house she could not do. The Colgan's house was spotlessly clean, as bright as the buttons on Joe Colgan's tramwayman's uniform. And it was specially tidy this night of late December.

"I've a' my cleanin' done but the brass things and the dish covers, and I'll do them the morn and have a' ready for Christmas," Mrs Colgan had said to Bridget before leaving. "Jist you sit there in the big chair and read your story-book. Josie'll no' let a cheep oot o' his head. If he does ye'll jist gi'e him a drink. Ye ken where the milk is!"

But Bridget, worker as she was, started right away on the brass candlesticks. Polish as she might, however, they refused to be made any brighter. She tried one of the dish covers—no better! Somewhat disappointed she sat down in the big chair. It was cosy. The fire was bright and warm. Everything was terribly still, but she was not frightened. Tick, tick, went the clock.

It seemed very loud. Then she heard wee Josie's breathing. She was sure the clock would waken him. She listened for some time. The two sounds seemed to grow into each other. But what was that? Another sound! Surely the scratching of a mouse behind the dresser! It moved along slowly towards the door, and back again, and then up behind the plaster—scrat, scrat! It grew fainter and fainter, but it was still there. Then, it too seemed to fit in with the tick, tick of the clock and Josie's breathing. It couldn't be a mouse, that was certain, for Toby had not stirred.

She closed her eyes. It must be lovely to be a mother, she thought. Baby Jesus, she was sure, could not have been nicer than Josie, as nice maybe, no baby could be nicer, she didn't care who said it. She was going to midnight Mass at Christmas. If they would only put Josie in the crib in the Chapel he would be quite good. She could watch him. And he always wakened with a smile anyway. She loved to give him his bath. She was staying all night, and would maybe get him into bed with her in the morning.

There was a tapping noise—on the ceiling this time. The mouse again. She looked up.

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There, astride the clothes-pole was a tiny wee man wearing a lovely green jacket with silver buttons.

“Don't be afraid,” he said in a pleasant voice. He was busy unscrewing the pulley. This done, he lowered one end of the pole till it touched the floor, while the other end was still close to the ceiling. He must be very strong, she thought. He was no taller than her hand. He gave three taps on the floor with a little hammer. In a twinkling scores of other wee

men, all dressed alike, jumped one after the other from the top of the window on to the pole, and slid down stride-legs to the floor. She was afraid they would get hurt, but they were as nimble as cats. No sooner were they all gathered, than they started as busy as bees, to polish the brass things. They took down the jellypan from the shelf, the brass kettle, and the candlesticks and the dish covers. They puffed and blew, and polished and polished, finishing off with dusters as fine as butterflies wings.

She knew who they were—fine! Her mother had told her about them—the leprehaun. But she thought the leprehaun were only in Ireland. She did not know they came to Glasgow. Maybe they only came for Christmas. The leader jumped on the arm of her chair and spoke. He had a voice like Father Regan, but softer.

“Bridget,” he said, “we are here to make ready the house for two who will come this very night with tidings of great joy.”

By this time the polishing was finished, and the leprehaun were amusing themselves by doing gymnastic feats. Some of them were using the handle of the jellypan as a trapeze, while others were dancing on the lid of the kettle, or balancing themselves on the candlesticks, or gliding down the smooth surface of the dish covers.

Having spoken, the leader again gave three taps with his hammer and in a moment everything was in its place, and the leprehaun scampering up the clothes-pole to the window.

“My darling wee Josie! Isn't he lovely? As

warm's a pie, and sweet as can be! See, Joe, he's smiling in his sleep—the dear! My wee angel doodleums!”

Bridget was dimly conscious of two figures, a man and a woman, standing beside Josie's crib. It was the woman who was speaking, bent down, with her hand on Josie's brow. On the coverlet of the bed looking into the crib, was Toby, wide awake, his back arched with joy, his tail upturned and active.

“Hark the herald angels sing!” It was the “waits” playing outside. Bridget had heard them last year.

“Was my wee Bridget sleeping?” said Mrs. Colgan, and Bridget cried. She had never been known to fail in her duty before.

“Oh, Mrs. Colgan, I'm sorry,” she said.

Joe took her on his knee. “What are ye sorry for, my lassie? A wee cup o' tea, and then aff wi' yer claes and slip into the kitchen bed, and we'll put wee Josie in beside ye. Mary and me'll sleep in the room the night.”