

The Little Cloud's Gift

ONE AUGUST DAY a little cloud dozed dreamily above the foothills of southern California. A Sylph Maiden, floating through the air, bumped right into the cloud's head and woke him up.

"Pardon me," she said, "but now that you are awake, please talk to me. I'm Sylph Maiden and I'm lonely."

"Oh," yawned the little cloud. "Well, I'm Puffy, and what do you want to talk about?"

"Let's talk about the lovely canyon directly under us," said the Sylph. "Tell me, Puffy, what do you see down there? You can see much farther than I can."

The little cloud yawned again and rolled half way over to look down into the canyon below. "I see a big, big tree," he said. "And in the tree I see a squirrel family playing up and down along its branches."

"Yes, yes. Go on," urged the Sylph. "Tell me what other things you see."

The little cloud rolled farther over, and then said, "I see a baby rabbit jumping along the trail under the big tree, and I see some birds, and they are singing. I can hear them."

"But I can see something reddish down there, and it seems to be moving. What is that?" asked the Sylph.

The little cloud rolled over so far he almost stood on end.

"Oh," he cried, "it's a fire! And it will spread across the middle of the canyon unless someone stops it. Oh, Sylph, what can we do?"



Grace Stern

A cloud dozed above the foothills of southern California.

"Well, we must do something," declared the Sylph. "Think of all the little animals, and the birds, and the nice trees. We must save them."

"But how, Sylph Maiden?" frantically inquired Puffy. "Oh, if only I were a huge, dark thundercloud. Then I would pour down gallons of rain and put the fire right out."

The little cloud was right. He wasn't nearly heavy enough to put the fire out. It was just then that a big airplane zoomed in above them. The airplane kept flying around and around in circles.

Sylph Maiden said, "You wait here, Puffy, while I fly up and talk to the Gremlins on that plane. I'll ask them if they can think of any way to put the fire out. We must think of some way to save the little animals and birds and trees."

So away Sylph Maiden flew.

"Hi there," an odd little voice called from the wing of the plane.



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"Oh, hello, Gremlin," Sylph Maiden panted. She had been flying so fast that she could hardly get her breath. "I...I came up to ask if you can put out that fire. See down there in the canyon? Soon it will spread all across the canyon."

"Of course I see it," answered the Gremlin. "And that's exactly why we came up here."

"But I can't imagine how you can put it out," Sylph Maiden exclaimed impatiently. "You'll never do it going around and around in circles way up here."

"Well, I'll tell you," said the Gremlin. "Don't you know that human people have discovered how to make rain with dry ice? They fly over some little cloud, then drop lots of pieces of dry ice into it. That makes the little cloud turn into a big, dark thunder-cloud, and before you know it, rain comes pouring down."

Sylph Maiden hovered back away from the plane as if she were nervous and maybe doubted his words.

Then she asked, "Do you really think you can do that to that little cloud down there?"

The Gremlin answered with much firmness, "I told you once that that's exactly what we came up here for. If you want to stay, you can watch us do it."

Sylph Maiden turned and in a jiffy she was back with the little cloud.

"Oh! Puffy," she cried "you can't guess what's going to happen to you!"



"Dry ice makes the little cloud turn into a big, dark thunder-cloud, and before you know it, rain comes pouring down."

The little cloud hardly heard what she was saying, for he was still gazing down at the canyon and wondering how to put out the fire.

Flapping her wings against his puffy cheeks, Sylph Maiden shouted in his ear, "Don't you hear me, Puffy?"

The little cloud turned his head and said apologetically, "I'm sorry, Sylph Maiden, but I didn't hear you. What did you say?"

Sylph Maiden continued to shout. "You're going to be turned into a great, enormous thunder-cloud, Puffy! And you're going to pour gallons and gallons of rain down there and put that fire out. A Gremlin on the airplane told me so."

"Sylph Maiden," cried the little cloud, "how can you tell jokes when all the animals and birds down there are in such danger from the fire? I thought you loved them."

"I do, but the Gremlin did tell me that," Sylph Maiden shouted back at him.

“Those Gremlins talk too much,” replied the cloud crossly. “And with all that noise they’re making over my head and the fire crackling below, I’m about to go crazy.”

“Puffy, you listen to me,” cried Sylph Maiden. “That Gremlin told me that that big noisy airplane is going to drop lots of pieces of dry ice on you and that it will turn you into a great, big, dark thundercloud. And then you’ll pour enough rain down to put the fire out. Just think of it, Puffy! You’ll be a hero. You’ll save all those little lives. You’ll save the squirrels and chipmunks and birds and all the trees, too.”

When the little cloud finally understood what Sylph Maiden was trying to tell him, he got so excited that away he went, tearing along above the foothills.

The airplane hurried down, Sylph Maiden got aboard, and then they raced after the little cloud to try to bring him back. But the little cloud kept right on puffing along at top speed, while Sylph Maiden kept wringing her hands and shouting to the pilot, “Oh, hurry! Please hurry and head him off before it is too late.”

The fat little cloud had been puffing along so fast that soon he was all worn out. Then, like a tired kitten, suddenly he just stopped and fell fast asleep.

“Oh! Oh! Oh!” moaned the Gremlin. “This will never do. Here we are all ready to stuff dry ice in him and he falls asleep on top of a vineyard. If we dropped the ice here we’d simply ruin old man Finnigan’s raisin crop. What shall we do? What shall we do?”

“Hey,” another Gremlin called, “know what we might do? If we hung down by long ropes under the plane maybe we could blow him back.”

Sylph Maiden then drew herself up and said with authority, “Nothing is easier to move than a sleeping cloud. With Puffy fast asleep I can push him along faster than you could with all your blowing. Watch me and follow, in case I get out of

breath.”

With the greatest of ease the Sylph Maiden pushed the little cloud on and on, faster and faster, and in no time Puffy was right over the blaze in the canyon.

The Gremlins, admiring the speed with which Sylph Maiden worked, but not to be outdone, now jumped on the pilot’s shoulders and whispered to him, “Now is the time. Act quick. Drop the ice, drop the ice.”

The pilot smiled. Without being told he knew the very minute to drop the ice, but because the Gremlins were friendly fellows, even though they were sometimes noisy, he agreed with them that now was the time, because it really was. So immediately they all began dropping pieces of dry ice down. Plop, plop, plop, it hit the little cloud, which had been looking like a fluffy white kitten, but right that minute started turning into a huge, growling black cloud.

Before you could say “Boo” he was clapping his thunder madly and pouring rain down all over the canyon. In no time the fire was out.

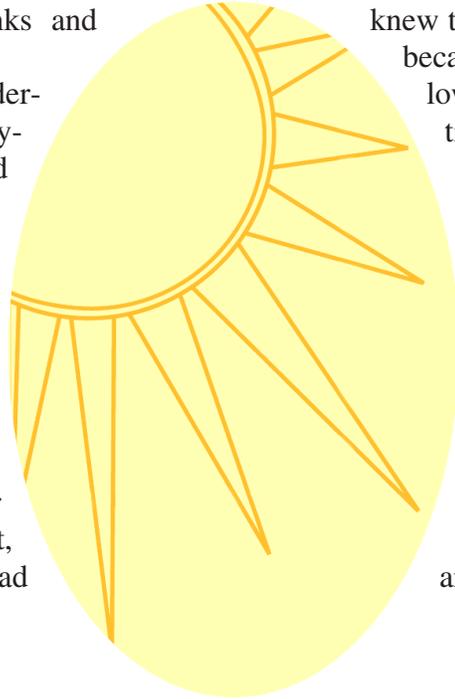
In places where the fire had burned were now black patches of ground because all the grass and little shrubs were burned up, and that was very sad. It brought tears to the Sylph Maiden’s eyes and she had to wipe them away before she could see.

“Puffy,” she called, “some spots in the canyon are black, all the green things are gone.

She waited but the little cloud didn’t say anything. Then she looked toward him to ask him again, but there was no little cloud in the sky. Then she knew what had happened. Puffy had given all of himself to save the animals and the birds and the trees.

For a minute Sylph Maiden held her hand to her throat. Then she smiled, because what good are any of us if we don’t help our friends? □

—Patsey Ellis



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