

Margot and the Stag of the Bells

Once, among the mountains of France, stood a little village called Bellefontaine. Its houses were stone, its roofs were slate, and a bell tower in the square could be seen throughout the valley.

The villagers had an ancient custom. On the first snowy night of winter, they left a piece of bread on every windowsill.

They said that while everyone slept, a white stag crossed the village. Three golden bells hung from his great antlers.

The first protected the bread in the ovens. The second kept the household fires alight. The third reminded neighbours that no winter is quite so cold when people help one another.

For many years, nobody forgot. Then one summer the harvest was poor. By autumn, the flour sacks were half empty and every family began to guard what it had.

“This year we cannot give away a single crumb,” they said.

Margot lived with her parents above the village bakery. She was eight years old, with brown hair and a red cloak sewn by her grandmother.

On the evening of the first snow, her mother took a small cake from the oven.

“It is the last we can bake until more flour comes. We shall save it for tomorrow.”

“Will we leave nothing at the window?” Margot asked.

“Not this year, child.”

That night, no house offered bread. Windows closed and snow covered the streets.

At midnight, Margot heard a very faint sound.

“Ting…”

She looked outside. A completely white stag stood in the square. Three bells hung from his antlers, but only one had made that feeble sound.

The stag looked at Margot and walked towards the forest.

Margot put on her cloak, took a lantern and wrapped the last cake in a cloth.

The stag waited beside the frozen fountain.

“I knew you would come,” he said.

“You can speak!”

“Only on the first snowy night. The bells have fallen silent and the cold will grow stronger. We must reach the Winter King’s castle before the moon disappears.”

Margot climbed onto his back and they entered the forest.

Before long, they saw an old woman shivering beneath an oak.

“I have walked for two days,” she explained. “Nobody would let me in.”

Margot remembered that she carried the bakery’s last food. Even so, she divided the cake into three and gave one piece to the woman and one to the stag.

The first bell began to ring.

“Ting, ting, ting!”

“What is shared nourishes more than what is hoarded,” said the old woman.

For a moment, transparent wings shone beneath her cloak. Then she vanished into the snow.

Margot and the stag reached the Bridge of Mirrors. Beneath the stones lay nothing but deep mist.

A voice asked:

“Only one who tells the truth may cross. Are you not afraid?”

Margot wanted to appear brave, but her legs trembled.

“I am. I fear falling, getting lost and failing my village. But I shall go on.”

The second bell awoke and the mist opened a safe path.

“Courage is not walking without fear,” said the stag. “It is refusing to let fear choose for you.”

Farther on, they heard a growl. A large grey wolf had one paw caught in an iron trap.

Margot could have fled, but she saw the animal’s wound.

“I shall not hurt you if you do not hurt me.”

She covered the wolf’s head with her cloak and opened the trap with a branch. The wolf pulled free, licked her hand and vanished among the trees.

The third bell rang so loudly that snow fell from the branches like a shower of stars.

At last they reached the Winter King’s castle. In the great hall waited a king with a crown of frost and a white beard.

“Why have you awakened the bells?” he asked.

“Our village is freezing. We need you to return its warmth.”

The king struck the floor with his staff.

“I took nothing. The villagers closed their doors, hid their bread and stopped caring for one another. The warmth you seek is not inside this castle.”

“Then was my journey for nothing?”

“No. You brought what your village lacked: generosity, courage and kindness.”

The king placed a small blue coal inside Margot’s lantern.

“This flame will burn only when it passes from hand to hand. If anyone tries to keep it, it will die.”

Outside, the grey wolf waited and showed them a shortcut. Before dawn, Margot returned to Bellefontaine.

The flame was almost gone. Margot knocked on a door and asked a family to share wood with neighbours who had none. When they did, the flame grew.

The blacksmith repaired a widow’s stove. A farmer shared potatoes. The miller opened the flour store.

The lantern turned golden and the neighbours lit the bakery oven together.

All three bells rang. Ice melted in the wells and the great village bell sounded across the valley.

When Margot looked for the stag, he was gone. Only three golden marks remained upon the snow.

From that winter on, the villagers never again closed their doors to somebody in need. On the first snowy night, they always left bread at the window.

They say that anyone who leaves it with a generous heart may hear three bells in the forest. Sometimes they may also see a girl in a red cloak walking beside a white stag.