

RUMPELSTILTSKINSKI

By ROBERT F. YOUNG

Another romp in fairytale land, as the ancient myths are up-dated in a way calculated to make the brothers Grimm and Hans un-Christian.

ONCE there was a miller who was car-poor but who had a luscious dish of a daughter named Ada. Now during National Bread Week it happened that he was chosen by the National Flourmen's Association, of which he was a charter member, to go to the Palace to accept a special award from the King. After the King presented him with the award—following a lengthy speech extolling the flourmen's contribution to the Health of the National Economy—the miller, seeking to make a favorable impression, said, "I have a daughter who can spin gold into straw." The King was favorably impressed indeed, and spoke as follows: "That is an ability which this Kingdom can put to excellent use. A little bit of gold is a good thing, but too much of it is dangerous to have around, for it impedes Progress, interferes with International Negotiations, and jeopardizes World Peace. Bring your daughter to the Palace tomorrow and we'll give her a Security Check. If she passes it, I'll put her to work at once."

When Ada heard the news, she was petrified with fear. Much less than knowing how to spin gold into straw, she didn't even know how to operate a spinning wheel. But she was an accommodating young lady and very very patriotic, and she felt that she owed it both to her country and to herself to give the job a whirl. So the next day when her father said, "Let's be on our way, daughter—His Munificence is waiting," she accompanied him to the Palace without a word of protest.

She passed the Security Check with flying colors, whereupon the King took her into a room that was almost overflowing with gold, presented her with a Whirly Wheel-O-Matic spinning machine By General Electric, and said, "Go, girl—go ! If I see so much as one gold ingot when I come into this room tomorrow morning, I'll have you audited." Thereupon he left the room and locked the door behind him.

Poor Ada hadn't gambled on being thrown to the auditors, and she was beside herself with despair. Hoping to calm herself, she turned on the transistor radio set which she carried with her wherever she went, and tuned in her favorite disk jockey. But his music didn't help matters in the least, and all she could think of as she sat there absently wriggling her body in response to the cauterwauling of the Beatles was the grim facade of the IRS Building next door and the pride of auditors lurking hungrily beyond its portentous portals.

AND then, all of a sudden just when things looked blackest—the door burst open and into the room popped a roly-poly little man wearing an astrakan overcoat and a bearskin cap. "What's the trouble, dollski?" he asked. "How come you're making like the Volga on a nice night like this?"

"Alas!" Ada answered, "I'm in a terrible pickle. If I don't spin all this nasty old gold into straw by morning, His Munificence will throw me to the auditors!"

"What'll you give me," said the little man, "if I take on the job?"

"Why—why I'll give you anything!" our heroine cried.

"Your radio will do for a starter." Taking it from her and turning it off, the mannikin sat down at the Whirly Wheel-O-Matic, wedged a gold ingot between the superspindle and the jenny-jig, and did something to the controls that made the machine go *whir-whir-whir!*; and in less time than it takes to tell about it, there, where a moment before the hateful ingot had been, stood a beautiful little bale of straw. Ada, it goes without saying, was astonished.

All through the night the mannikin worked at the Wheel without taking so much as a single coffee break and by morning the gold was gone and the room was so full of straw there was hardly enough space to turn around. He departed at daybreak, and not long afterward the King came round. When he

saw all the straw, he could hardly believe his eyes, and it was as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. But there was still a lot of gold to go yet—indeed, it had been accumulating for nearly two centuries—so that night he took Ada into an even larger room full of it, had the Whirly Wheel-O-Matic brought in, and told her that, come morning, he expected to see another room full of straw and that if he didn't she could plan on seeing a room full of auditors.

After he left, Ada sat down by the Whirly Wheel-O-Matic and began to cry; then, as before, the door burst open and in popped the little man in the astrakhan overcoat and the bearskin cap. "What'll you give me," he asked, "if I convert *this* batch for you?"

"My purse," our heroine replied. "But I warn you, there's nothing in it except a lot of musty old papers and a silly document or two."

"I'll take it," said the mannikin, and set to work again, and by morning the room was chockfull of straw and all the gold was gone.

The King, needless to say, was delighted when he came round at dawn ; but there was still another room full of gold remaining—larger than the first two combined—so that evening he escorted Ada there, had the Whirly Wheel-O-Matic carried in, and said, "Two down and one to go, doll-baby. If you do as thorough a job on this roomful as you did on the other two, I'll make you my Queen."

The King had no sooner left the room than the mannikin popped into it for the third time and said, "What'll you give me, dollski, if I pull you out of the borscht again?"

"Alas!" answered our heroine, "I have nothing left to give."

"Oh, but you have," said the mannikin. "Promise me your firstborn child."

Why not? thought Ada. Who knows for certain whether I shall ever have one? And anyway, if I do, I will be ensuring its safety as well as my own by getting rid of all this nasty old gold. Whereupon she gave the little man her promise, and once more he made straw while the stars shone. By morning there was almost enough of it to stuff all the people in the Kingdom, and when the King saw how poor he was, he was delighted, and made the pretty miller's daughter his Queen.

A YEAR went by, and the Queen had a beautiful child and never once gave a thought to the promise she had made to the mannikin—until, one night, he popped into her boudoir and said, "I am here to collect my fee." The Queen was horrified, and offered to give him all the new cars and all the new swimming pools and all the new electric can-openers in the Kingdom if he would let her renege on her promise. She even offered to arrange for him to appear on "What's My Line". But the little man merely shook his head and said, "No, dollski—you made a bargain and you're stuck with it. But I'll make you a deal: if, within three days time, you can find out my name I'll let you keep the child."

All night long the Queen racked her brains, but to no avail. When morning arrived, she sent for the head of the FBI and ordered him to send his agents throughout the Kingdom and ferret out people with unusual names and report them to her; then she set up an intra-Palace workforce called the Abnormal Appellations Analysis Bureau, provided it with copies of all the phone directories in the Kingdom, and put it to work isolating extraordinary appellations. Realizing that the little man might not have an unusual name after all, she sounded him out that night when he came round. "Is your name 'Smith'?" she asked. "Is it 'Jones'? Is it 'Brown'?" When he shook his head each time, she was pretty certain that she was on the right track.

The following evening, thanks to the AAA's exhaustive efforts, she was ready for him, and as soon as he popped into her boudoir she began barraging him with such names as Pyzikiewicz, 'Milscotchach', and 'Tchitchikov' ; but to each, he shook his head.

Toward the close of the third day, the Queen was becoming desperate. Then, just when she had almost given up hope, one of the FBI agents came to her with a curious story. "Night before last not far from the Palace," he said, "I came upon a used-car lot and in the lot I found an abandoned beat-up Cadillac that had been converted into a little house. Before the house a fire was burning, and round about the fire a ridiculous little man wearing an astrakhan overcoat and a bearskin cap was dancing on one leg, singing

`Today I wait, tomorrow I take,
The next I'll have the young Queen's child.
Ha! glad am I that no one cared
That Rumpelstiltskinski I'm styled!" "

As can readily be imagined, the Queen was elated. When the mannikin showed up that night she said, as casually as though she were asking the time of day, "Is your name `Rumpelstiltskinski' by any chance?"

His gloating expression gave way to one of almost indescribable ugliness. "Give me the child!" he said sharply.

The Queen was incredulous. "But according to our agreement, you no longer have any right to it!" she cried.

Rumpelstiltskinski didn't bat an eye. "What agreement?" he said, and took the child and went away, and that was the last the Queen ever saw of it.

THE END