

Old Rip and The Little Elves

by MABEL L. REES

ONCE upon a time in the little town of Faraway a cobbler sat nodding at his bench. So often was he found slumbering at his work that people frequently called him Old Rip. Instead of dreaming of little men playing games in the mountains like his famous namesake, the shoemaker thought of the fairy tale once told to him by a customer, of the elves who came by night and finished all the poor cobbler's work.

This particular morning he was startled from his reverie by the loud ringing of his shop bell. To his surprise the postman entered and handed him a large envelope. "Something for you at last, Rip, and it looks pretty important."

The cobbler jerked himself upright. "For me? Please stay and read it to me—you know I don't see very well and I never went to school."

Obligingly the postman waited while Old Rip hastily tore open the envelope. Out tumbled some official looking documents. One of them bore a gold seal. Quickly the postman glanced over the contents and then gave a loud whistle. "Why Rip," he cried, "you've become a landowner. This is a letter from Squire Pound's lawyer. He says the Squire died abroad of a heart attack, but he remembered you in his will because you once did him a favor, and he's left you 300 acres of his estate. Here's the deed and a map."

For a moment Old Rip looked dazed and rubbed his head in utter disbelief. Then he said in a trembling voice, "yes, yes, I remember now. Once when he was ill I let all my other work wait and went to his home to make a pair of boots he needed for a sudden journey."

"And at last here is your reward. Your land is marked in red ink, some-

where near Marketdale. That's not on my route. It's a good long walk from here but I suppose you'll want to go see it."

"Of course," agreed Old Rip eagerly. And no sooner had the postman left to spread the good word among the neighbors than the old man was on his way with a few slices of bread in his pocket and a stout cane in his hand. For once he felt wide awake and started off at a brisk pace, but as the road soon turned into a rough trail he was forced to proceed at a slow jog-trot. By the time he neared Marketdale the sun was setting and he was thoroughly tired out. Scrambling up the last remaining hill in his pathway he was just able to make out the church spire and the cupola on the distant town hall, but there were no other buildings to be seen.

"Oh dear," sighed Rip, "whatever can I do with my land. It's full of trees and rocks and so far from people nobody will want it. I'm still as poor as I ever was."

Just as he reached this sad conclusion it began to rain and Rip was forced to forego any further regrets while he looked about for some refuge from the downpour. Nearby he spotted a great clump of bushes and brambles and hurriedly forcing his way into this natural bower he discovered it was protected by a large slap of stone leading into a cave. He seated himself inside and was soon fast asleep.

It seemed that he had scarcely closed his eyes when he was roused from slumber by a confusion of unfamiliar sounds, some near, some far away. For a moment he imagined himself back in his shop as he murmured, "it must be the elves at work. My dream has at last come true."

The next instant he realized where

he was however, and creeping from his hidden resting place he stood up. The rain had stopped and the sun was shining. Chancing to put his hand to his face he was amazed at the length of his beard and the ragged condition of his clothes. He took a step forward and found himself almost too weak to walk. Then he felt in his pocket and drew forth the letter and deed the postman had given him, only to find that they were faded and torn.

Supporting himself with his cane he struggled up the hill and gasped in astonishment. What a transformation! Instead of the rural scene he now saw a city. It had grown up right to the edge of his own land, and noisy building operations were going on.

"My, my," he muttered, "it must be magic! I never thought elves could build houses as well as mend shoes. I..." But just here he was interrupted by the shouts of a man who looked at him strangely.

"Who are you, where have you come from? Are you a beggar?"

Weak as he was, Old Rip drew himself up with as much strength as he could command. "A beggar! Not I. I'm a landowner and here is my deed. I'm Rip, the cobbler from..."

"From Faraway?" the man broke in. "The postman there thought you must have starved to death in the woods and been eaten up by wild animals. We've been looking for you everywhere. I'm the owner of a plot next to yours and we need your land badly. Marketdale is changing its name to Boomville now

that a new bridge has been thrown over the river to the next town. I'll make you a good offer for your land and you'll be a rich man."

Old Rip sank down on the nearest stone. "Last night when I got here," he began, "I saw only empty land..."

"Last night," exploded the stranger. "Why man it's taken us three years to make this development. Where have you been wandering around? Are you crazy?"

"I don't understand," whispered the cobbler. "I worked hard all my life yet I remained poor. Now I must have been asleep three years and I wake up rich. How wonderful to be a landowner. Perhaps if I had kept my land a little longer I'd be... What bell is that?"

Before he could utter another word his shop door opened and the postman walked in. "Surprise, Rip," he called out, "here's a letter for you from Squire Pounds."

"Another one?" asked the cobbler faintly. "Will you please read it to me?"

"What do you mean, another one? This is the first letter you've had in ages."

As in his dream, now in reality, Old Rip watched the postman as he opened the letter. It took only a moment for him to read it. Then he turned and said, "I'm afraid it's not very good news, Rip. The Squire says land is more and more in demand with the new highway proposed to Marketdale, and he's got to raise your rent."

Russel Conklin of Great Falls has written a 500-word editorial for one of the Montana newspapers, but not all of his letters and articles are about Henry George. A recent letter to the editor speaks of how frustrating it is to wait for federal aid for the improvement of the streets in Great Falls.

Ten years ago they created a Kiwanis special improvement district and paved 75 miles of streets—still the best in the state. The promised federal aid has not come, and they still have pot-holed streets downtown.

So, says Russel Conklin, "it's about time we realized that if we want to improve our town we better do it ourselves. Even if we get the planning funds we'll have to repay the money advanced as soon as the project is started. It's our town. We'd better make plans to do it ourselves."