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The Three Sleeping Boys of Warwickshire

by

Walter de la Mare

(from his *Collected Stories for Children* [1947]

In a long, low-ceiled, white-washed room on the upper floor of a red-brick building in Pleasant Street, Cheriton, ranged there in their glazed cases, is a collection of shells, conchs, seaweeds, sea-flowers, corals, fossils, goggling fish, stuffed birds—sea and land—and 'mermaids'. Coffers, chests and anchors, and old guns, and lumps of amber and ore and quartz. All sorts of outlandish oddities, too, curiosities and junk. And there for years and years—the narrow windows, with their carved brick fruits and flowers and old leaden gutters, showering the day's light upon their still retreat—there for years and years slumbered on in their great glass case the Three Sleeping Boys of Warwickshire. The tale of them goes a long way back. But so, too, do most tales, sad or merry, if only you will follow them up.

About the year 1600, when Queen Elizabeth was sixty-seven, and William Shakespeare was writing his play called 'Julius Caesar', there died, twenty-four miles from Stratford-on-Avon, a rich miller—John James Nollykins by name. His was the handsomest mill in Warwickshire. But none of his neighbours—or none at least of his poorer neighbours—could abide the sight of him. He was a morose, close-fisted, pitiless old man. He cheated his customers and had no mercy for those whom he enticed into his clutches.

As he grew older he had grown ever more mean and churlish until at last he had even begun to starve his own horses. Though he died rich, then, few of his neighbours mourned him much. And as soon as he was gone his money began to go too. His three sons gobbled up what he had left behind him, as jackals gobble up a lion's left supper-bones. It slipped through their fingers like sand through a sieve. They drank, they diced, they gambled high and low. They danced, and capered and feasted in their finery; but they hardly knew offal from grain. Pretty soon they began to lose not only their father's trade but also all his savings. Their customers said that there was not only dust but stones in the flour; and tares too. It was fusty; it smelt mousy. What cared they? They took their terriers rat-hunting, but that was for the sake of the sport and not of the flour. Everything about the Mill got shabbier and shabbier—went to rack and ruin. The sails were patched. They clacked in the wind. The rain drove in. There were blossoming weeds in the millstream and dam where should have been nothing but crystal water. And when their poorer customers complained, they were greeted with drunken jeers and mockery.

At length, three or four years after the death of the miller's last poor half-starved mare, his sons were ruined. They would have been ruined just the same if, as one foul windy night they sat drinking and singing together in the Mill-house, the youngest of them had not knocked over the smoking lamp on the table, and so burned the Mill to the ground.

The eldest—with what he could pick up—went off to Sea, and to foreign parts, and died of yellow fever in Tobago. The second son was taken in by an uncle who was a goldsmith in London. But he was so stupid and indolent that he broke more than he mended; and at last, by swallowing an exquisitely carved peach-stone from China, which had been brought back to Italy by Marco Polo, so enraged his master that he turned him off then and there. He went East and became a fishmonger in Ratcliff Highway, with a shop like a booth, and a long board in front of it. But he neglected this trade too, and at last became a man-of-all-work (or of none) at the old Globe Theatre in Southwark, where he saw Shakespeare dressed up as the ghost in 'Hamlet' and was all but killed as if by accident while taking the part of the Second Murderer

in 'Macbeth'.

The youngest son, named Jeremy, married the rich widow of a saddler. She was the owner of a fine gabled house in the High Street of the flourishing town of Cheriton—some eight miles from Bishops Hitchingworth. He had all the few good looks of the family, but he was sly and crafty and hard. The first thing he did after he came home from his honeymoon was to paint in a long red nose to the portrait of the saddler. The next thing he did was to drown his wife's cat in the water-butt, because he said the starveling had stolen the cheese. The third thing he did was to burn her best Sunday bonnet, then her wig—to keep it company. How she could bear to go on living with him is a mystery. Nevertheless she did.

This Jeremy had three sons: Job, John and (another) Jeremy. But he did not nourish. Far from it. The family went 'down the ladder', rung by rung, until at long last it reached the bottom. Then it began to climb up again. But Jeremy's children did best. His youngest daughter married a well-to-do knacker, and *their* only son (yet another Jeremy), though he ran away from home because he hated water-gruel and suet pudding, went into business as assistant to the chief sweep in Cheriton. And, at last, having by his craft and cunning and early rising and hardworking inherited his master's business, he bought his great-uncle's fine gabled house, and became Master Chimney-Sweep and 'Sweep by Appointment', to the Mayor and Corporation and the Lords of three neighbouring Manors. And *he* never married at all. In spite of his hard childhood, in spite of the kindness shown him by his master, in spite of his good fortune with the three Lords of the Manor, he was a skinflint and a pick-halfpenny. He had an enormous brush over his door, a fine brass knocker, and—though considering all things, he had mighty few friends—he was the best, as well as the richest master-sweep in those parts.

But a good deal of his money and in later years most of his praise was due to his three small orphan 'prentices—Tom, Dick and Harry. In those days, hearths and fireplaces were as large as little rooms or chambers, or at any rate, as large as large cupboards or closets. They had wide warm comfortable ingle-nooks, and the chimneys were like deep wells running up to the roof, sometimes narrowing or angling off towards the top. And these chimneys were swept by hand.

Jeremy's 'prentices, then, had to climb up and up, from sooty brick to brick with a brush, and sweep till they were as black as blackest blackamoors, inside and out. Soot, soot, soot! Eyes, mouth, ears and nose. And now and then the bricks were scorching hot, and their hands got blistered. And now and then they were all but suffocated in the narrow juts. And once in a while were nearly wedged there, to dry like mummies in the dark. And sometimes, in the midst of the smother, a leg would slip, and down they would come tumbling like apples out of a tree or hailstones out of a cloud in April.

And Jeremy Nollykins, after tying up all the money they brought him in fat canvas and leather bags, served them out water-gruel for supper, and water-gruel for breakfast. For dinner on Tuesdays and Thursdays he gave them slabs of suet-pudding with lumps of suet in it like pale amber beads; what he called soup on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays; and a bit of catsmeat (bought cheap from his second cousin) on Sundays. But then you can't climb chimneys on *no* meat. On Saturdays they had piping-hot pease-pudding and pottage: because on Saturdays the Mayor's man might look in. You would hardly believe it: but in spite of such poor mean living, in spite of their burns and their bruises, and the soot in their eyes and lungs and in their close lint-coloured hair, these three small boys, Tom, Dick and Harry, managed to keep their spirits up. They even rubbed their cheeks rosy after the week's soot had been washed off under the pump on a Saturday night.

They were like Tom Dacre in the poem:

> *...There's little Tom Dacre, who cried when his head*
> *That curled like a lamb's back was shaved: so I said*
> *'Hush, Tom! never mind it for when your head's bare*
> *You know that the soot cannot spoil your white hair.'*
>
> *And so he was quiet, and that very night*
> *As Tom was a-sleeping, he had such a sight!*
> *That thousands of sleepers, Dick, Joe, Ned, and Jack*
> *Were all of them lock'd up in coffins of black....*

Still, they always said 'Mum' to the great ladies and 'Mistress' to the maids, and they kept their manners even when some crabbed old woman said they were owdacious, or imperent, or mis-cheevious. And sometimes a goodwife would give

them a slice of bread pudding, or a mug of milk, or a baked potato, or perhaps a pocket-full of cookies or a slice of white bread (which did not remain white for very long). And now and then, even a sip of elderberry wine. After all, even half-starved sparrows sometimes find tit-bits, and it's not the hungry who enjoy their victuals least.

When they *could* scuttle away too, they would bolt off between their jobs to go paddling in the river, or bird-nesting in the woods, or climbing in an old stone quarry not very far from the town. It was lovely wooded country thereabouts—near ancient Cheriton.

Whether they played truant or not, Jeremy Nollykins the Fourth—Old Noll, as his neighbours called him—used to beat them morning, noon and night. He believed in the rod. He spared nobody, neither man nor beast. Tom, Dick and Harry pretty well hated old Noll: and that's a bad thing enough. But, on the other hand, they were far too much alive and hearty and happy when they were not being beaten, and they were much too hungry even over their water-gruel to *think* or to brood over how much they hated him: which would have been very much worse.

In sober fact—with their bright glittering eyes and round cheeks and sharp white teeth, and in spite of their skinny ribs and blistered hands, they were a merry trio. As soon as ever their teeth stopped chattering with the cold, and their bodies stopped smarting from Old Noll's sauce, and their eyes from the soot, they were laughing and talking and whistling and champing, like grasshoppers in June or starlings in September. And though they sometimes quarrelled and fought together, bit and scratched too, never having been taught to fight fair, they were very good friends. Now and again too they shinned up a farmer's fruit-trees to have a taste of his green apples. Now and again they played tricks on old women. But what lively little chimney-sweeps wouldn't?

They were three young ragamuffins, as wild as colts, as nimble as kids, though a good deal blacker. And, however hard he tried, Old Noll never managed to break them in. Never. And at night they slept as calm and deep as cradled babies—all three of them laid in a row up in an attic under the roof on an immense wide palliasse or mattress of straw, with a straw bolster and a couple of pieces of old sacking for blankets each.

Now Old Noll, simply perhaps because he was—both by nature as well as by long practice—a mean old curmudgeonly miser, hated to see anybody merry, or happy, or even fat. There were moments when he would have liked to skin his three 'prentices alive. But then he wanted to get out of them all the work he could. So he was compelled to give them *that* much to eat. He had to keep them alive—or the Mayor's man would ask why. Still, it enraged him that he could not keep their natural spirits down; that however much he beat them they 'came up smiling'. It enraged him to know in his heart (or whatever took its place) that though—when they had nothing better to do, or were smarting from his rod in pickle—they detested him, they yet had never done him an ill-turn.

Every day he would gloat on them as they came clattering down to their water-gruel just as Giant Despair gloated on Faithful and Christian in the dungeon. And sometimes at night he would creep up to their bare draughty attic, and the stars or the moon would show him the three of them lying there fast asleep on their straw mattress, the sacking kicked off, and on their faces a faint far-away smile as if their dreams were as peaceful as the swans in the Islands of the Blest. It enraged him. What could the little urchins be dreaming about? What made ugly little blackamoors grin even in their sleep? You can thwack a wake boy, but you can't thwack a dreamer; not at least while he *is* dreaming. So here Old Noll was helpless. He could only grind his teeth at the sight of them. Poor Old Noll.

He ground his teeth more than ever when he first heard the music in the night. And he might never have heard it at all if hunger hadn't made him a mighty bad sleeper himself. A few restless hours was the most he got, even in winter. And if Tom, Dick and Harry had ever peeped in on *him* as he lay in his fourpost bed, they would have seen no smile on his old sunken face, with its long nose and long chin and straggling hair—but only a sort of horrifying darkness. They might even have pitied him, stretched out there, with nightmare twisting and contorting his sharp features, and his bony fingers continually on the twitch.

Because, then, Old Noll could not sleep of nights, he would sometimes let himself out of his silent house to walk the streets. And while so walking, he would look up at his neighbours' windows, glossily dark beneath the night-sky, and he would curse them for being more comfortable than he. It was as if instead of marrow he had malice in his bones, and there is no fattening on that.

Now one night, for the first time in his life, except when he broke his leg at eighteen, Old Noll had been unable to sleep at all. It was a clear mild night with no wind, and a fine mild scrap of a moon was in the West, and the stars shone bright.

There was always a sweet balmy air in Cheriton, borne in from the meadows that then stretched in within a few furlongs of the town; and so silent was the hour you could almost hear the rippling of the river among its osiers that far away.

And as Old Nollykins was sitting like a gaunt shadow all by himself on the first milestone that comes into the town—and he was too niggardly even to smoke a pipe of tobacco—a faint easy wind came drifting along the street. And then on the wind a fainter music—a music which at first scarcely seemed to be a music at all. None the less it continued on and on, and at last so rilled and trembled in the air that even Old Nollykins, who was now pretty hard of hearing, caught the strains and recognized the melody. It came steadily nearer, that music—a twangling and tootling and a horning, a breathing as of shawms, waxing merrier and merrier in the quick mild night October air:

> *Girls and boys, come out to play!*
> *The moon doth shine as bright as day;*
> *Leave your supper, and leave your sleep,*
> *And come with your playfellows into the street!...*

Girls and boys come out to play: on and on and on, now faint now shrill, now in a sudden rallying burst of sound as if it came from out of the skies. Not that the moon just then was shining as bright as day. It was but barely in its first quarter. It resembled a bent bit of intensely shining copper down low among the stars: or a gold basin, of which little more than the edge showed, resting a-tilt. But little moon or none, the shapes that were now hastening along the street, running and hopping and skipping and skirring and dancing, had heard the summons, had obeyed the call. From by-lane and alley, court, porch and house-door the children of Cheriton had come pouring out like water-streams in spring-time. Running, skipping, hopping, dancing, they kept time to the tune. Old Noll fairly gasped with astonishment as he watched them. What a dreadful tale to tell—and all the comfortable and respectable folks of Cheriton fast asleep in their beds! To think such innocents could be such wicked deceivers! To think that gluttonous and grubby errand and shop and boot-and-shoe and pot boys could look so clean and nimble and happy and free. He shivered; partly because of his age and the night air, and part with rage.

But real enough though these young skip-by-nights appeared to be, there were three queer things about them. First, there was not the faintest sound of doors opening or shutting, or casement windows being thrust open with a squeal of the iron rod. Next, there was not the faintest rumour of footsteps even, though at least half the children of Cheriton were now bounding along the street, like autumn leaves in the wind, and all with their faces towards the East and the water-meadows. And last, though Noll could see the very eyes in their faces in the faint luminousness of starshine and a little moon, not a single one of that mad young company turned head to look at him, or showed the least sign of knowing that he was there. Clockwork images of wood or wax could not have ignored him more completely.

Old Noll, after feeling at first startled, flabbergasted, a little frightened even, was now in a fury. His few old teeth began to grind together as lustily as had the millstones of Jeremy the First when he was rich and prosperous. Nor was his rage diminished when, lo and behold, even as he turned his head, out of his own narrow porch with its three rounded steps and fluted shell of wood above it, came leaping along who but his own three half-starved 'prentices, Tom, Dick and Harry—now seemingly nine-year-olds as plump and comely to see as if they had been fed on the fat of the land, as if they had never never in the whole of their lives so much as tasted rod-sauce. Their mouths were opening and shutting, too, as if they were whooping calls one to the other and to their other street-mates, though no sound came from them. They snapped their fingers in the air. They came cavorting and skirling along in their naked feet to the strains of the music as if bruised elbows, scorched shins, cramped muscles and iron-bound clogs had never once pestered their young souls. Yet not a sound, not a whisper, not a footfall could the deaf old man hear—nothing but that sweet, shrill and infuriating music.

In a few minutes the streets were empty, a thin fleece of cloud had drawn across the moon, and only one small straggler was still in sight, a grandson of the Mayor. He was last merely because he was least, and had nobody to take care of him. And Old Noll, having watched this last night-truant out of sight, staring at him with eyes like marbles beneath his bony brows, hobbled back across the street to his own house, and after pausing awhile at the nearest doorpost to gnaw his beard and think what next was to be done, climbed his three flights of shallow oak stairs until he came to the uppermost landing under the roof. There at last with infinite caution he lifted the pin of the door of the attic and peered in on what he supposed would be an empty bed. Empty! Not a bit of it! Lying there asleep, in the dim starlight of the dusty dormer window, he could see as plain as can be the motionless shapes of his three 'prentices, breathing on so calmly in midnight's deepmost slumber that he even ventured to fetch in a tallow candle in a pewter stick in order that he might

examine them more closely.

In its smoky beams he searched the three young slumbering faces. They showed no sign that the old skinflint was stooping as close over them as a bird-snarer over his nets. There were smears of soot even on their eye-lids and the fine dust of it lay thick on the flaxen lambs'-wool of their close-shorn heads. They were smiling away, gently and distantly as if they were sitting in their dreams in some wonderful orchard, supping up strawberries and cream; as though the spirits within them were un-tellably happy though their bodies were as fast asleep as humming-tops or honey-bees in winter.

Stair by stair Old Nollykins crept down again, blew out his candle, and sat down on his bed to think. He was a cunning old miser, which is as far away from being generous and wise as the full moon is from a farthing dip. His fingers had itched to wake his three sleeping chimney-boys with a smart taste of his rod, just to 'larn them a lesson'. He hated to think of the quiet happy smile resting upon their faces while the shadow-shapes or ghosts of them were out and away, pranking and gallivanting in the green water-meadows beyond the town. How was he to know that his dimming eyes had not deluded him? Supposing he went off to the Mayor himself in the morning and told his midnight tale, who would believe it? High and low, everybody hated him, and as like as not they would shut him up in the town jail for a madman, or burn his house about his ears supposing him to be a wizard. 'No, no, no!' he muttered to himself. 'We must watch and wait, friend Jeremy, and see what we *shall* see.'

Next morning his three 'prentices, Tom, Dick and Harry, were up and about as sprightly as ever, a full hour before daybreak. You might have supposed from their shining eyes and apple cheeks that they had just come back from a long holiday on the blissful plains of paradise. Away they tumbled—merry as frogs—to work, with their brushes and bags, still munching away at their gritty oatcakes—three parts bran to one of meal.

So intent had Old Noll been on watching from his chimney-corner what he could see in their faces at breakfast, and on trying to overhear what they were whispering to each other, that he forgot to give them their usual morning dose of stick. But not a word had been uttered about the music or the dancing or the merry-making at the water-meadows. They just chattered their usual scatter-brained gibberish to one another—except when they saw that the old creature was watching them; and he was speedily convinced that whatever adventures their dream-shapes may have had in the night-hours, these had left no impression on their waking minds.

Poor Old Noll. An echo of that music and the sight he had seen kept him awake for many a night after, and his body was already shrunken by age and by his miserly habits to nothing much more substantial than a bag of animated bones. And yet all his watching was in vain. So weary and hungry for sleep did he become, that when at last the hunter's moon shone at its brightest and roundest over the roofs of Cheriton, he nodded off in his chair. He was roused a few hours afterwards by a faint glow in his room that was certainly not moonlight, for it came from out of the black dingy staircase passage. Instantly he was wide awake—but too late. For, even as he peeped through the door-crack, there flitted past his three small 'prentices—just the ghosts or the spirits or the dream-shapes of them—faring happily away. They passed him softer than a breeze through a willow tree and were out of sight down the staircase before he could stir.

The morning after the morning after that, when Tom, Dick and Harry woke up at dawn on their mattress, there was a wonderful rare smell in the air. They sniffed it greedily as they looked at one another in the creeping light of daybreak. And sure enough, as soon as they were in their ragged jackets and had got down to their breakfast, the old woman who came to the house every morning to do an hour or two's charing for Old Nollykins, came waddling up to the kitchen table with a frying-pan of bacon frizzling in its fat.

'There, me boys,' said Old Noll, rubbing his hands together with a cringing smile, 'there's a rasher of bacon for ye all, and sop in the pan to keep the cold out, after that long night-run in the moonlight.'

He creaked up his eyes at them finger on nose; but all three of them, perched up there on their wooden stools the other side of the table, only paused an instant in the first polishing up of their plates with a crust of bread to stare at him with such an innocent astonishment on their young faces that he was perfectly sure they had no notion of what he meant.

'Aha,' says he, 'do ye never dream, me boys, tucked up snug under the roof in that comfortable bed of yours? D'ye never dream?—never hear a bit of a tune calling, or maybe see what's called a nightmare? Lordee, when I was young there never went a night but had summat of a dream to it.'

'Dream!' said they, and looked at one another with their mouths half open. 'Why, if you ax me, Master,' says Tom, 'I dreamed last night it was all bright moonshine, and me sitting at supper with the gentry.'

'And I,' says Dick, I dreamed I was dancing under trees and bushes all covered over with flowers. And I could hear 'em playing on harps and whistles.'

'And me,' says Harry, 'I dreamed I was by a river, and a leddy came out by a green place near the water and took hold of my hand. I suppose, Master, it must have been my mammie, though I never seed her as I knows on.'

At all this the cringing smile on Old Nollykins' face set like grease in a dish, because of the rage in his mind underneath. And he leaped up from where he sat beside the skinny little fire in the immense kitchen hearth. '"Gentry"! "Harps"! "Mammie"!' he shouted, 'you brazen, ungrateful, greedy little deevils. Be off with ye, or ye shall have such a taste of the stick as will put ye to sleep for good and all.'

And almost before they had time to snatch up their bags and their besoms, he had chased them out of the house. So there in the little alley beside the garden, sheltering as close to its wall as they could from the cold rain that was falling, they must needs stand chattering together like drenched jackdaws, waiting for the angry old man to come out and to send them about the business of the day.

But Old Nollykins' dish of bacon fat had not been altogether wasted. He knew now that the young rapscallions only *dreamed* their nocturnal adventures, and were not in the least aware that they themselves in actual shadow-shape went off by night to the trysting-place of all Cheriton's children to dance and feast and find delight. But he continued to keep watch, and would again and again spy in on his three 'prentices lying asleep together on their mattress up in the attic, in the hope of catching them in the act of stealing out. But although at times he discerned the same gentle smile upon their faces, shining none the less serenely for the white gutter-marks of tears on their sooty cheeks, for weeks together he failed to catch any repetition of the strains of the strange music or the faintest whisper of their dream-shapes coming and going on the wooden stairs.

Nevertheless, the more he brooded on what he had seen, the more he hated the three urchins, and the more bitterly he resented their merry ways. The one thing he could not decide in his mind was whether when next, if ever, he caught them at their midnight tricks, he should at once set about their slumbering bodies with his stick or should wait until their dream-wraiths were safely away and then try to prevent them from coming back. Then indeed they might be at his mercy.

Now there was an old crone in Cheriton who was reputed to be a witch. She lived in a stone hovel at the far end of a crooked alley that ran beside the very walls of Old Nollykins' fine gabled house. And Old Nollykins, almost worn to a shadow, knocked one dark evening at her door. She might have been the old man's grandmother as she sat there, hunched up in her corner beside the great iron pot simmering over the fire. He mumbled out his story about his three 'thieving, godless little brats', and then sat haggling over the price he should pay for her counsel. And even then he hoped to cheat her. At last he put his crown in her shrunken paw.

Waken a sleeper, she told him, before his dream-shape can get back into his mortal frame, it's as like as not to be sudden death. But keep the wandering dream-shape out *without* rousing his sleeping body, then he may for ever more be your slave, and will never grow any older. And what may keep a human's dream-shape out—or animal's either—she said, is a love-knot of iron the wrong way up or a rusty horseshoe upside down, or a twisted wreath of elder and ash fastened up with an iron nail over the keyhole—and every window shut. Brick walls and stone and wood are nothing to such wanderers. But they can't abide iron. And what she said was partly true and partly false; and it was in part false because the foolish old man had refused to pay the crone her full price.

He knew well, and so did she, that there was only a wooden latch to his door, because he had been too much of a skinflint to pay for one of the new iron locks to be fixed on. He had no fear of thieves, because he had so hidden his money that no thief on earth would be able to find it, not if he searched for a week. So he asked the old woman again, to make doubly sure, how long a natural human creature would live and work if his dream-shape never came back. 'Why, that,' she cheepered, leering up at him out of her wizened old face, 'that depends how young they be; what's the blood, and what's the heart. Take 'em in the first bloom,' she said, 'and so they keeps.' She had long ago seen what the old man was after, and had no more love for him than for his three noisy whooping chimney-sweeps.

Very unwillingly he dropped another piece of money into her skinny palm and went back to his house, not knowing that the old woman, to avenge herself on his skinflint ways, had told him only half the story. That evening his three 'prentices had a rare game of hide-and-seek together in the many-roomed old rat-holed house; for their master had gone out. The moment they heard his shuffling footsteps in the porch they scampered off to bed, and were to all appearance fast asleep

before he could look in on them.

He had brought back with him a bundle of switches of elder and ash, a ten-penny nail, a great key, and a cracked horseshoe. And, strange to say, the iron key which he had bought from a dealer in broken metal had once been the key of the Mill of rich old Jeremy the First at Stratford-on-Avon! He pondered half that night on what the old woman had said, and 'surely', said he to himself, 'their blood's fresh enough, my old stick keeps them out of mischief, and what is better for a green young body than a long day's work and not too much to eat, and an airy lodging for the night?' The cunning old creature supposed indeed, that if only by this sorcery and hugger-mugger he could keep their wandering dream-shapes from their bodies for good and all, his three young 'prentices would never age, never weary, but stay lusty and nimble perhaps for a century. Ay, he would use them as long as he wanted them, and sell them before he died. *He'd* teach them to play truant at night, when honest folk were snoring in their beds. For the first time for weeks his mingy supper off a crust and a ham-bone and a mug of water had tasted like manna come down from the skies.

The very next day chanced to be St. Nicholas's Day. And those were the times of old English winters. Already a fine scattering of snow was on the ground, like tiny white lumps of sago, and the rivers and ponds were frozen hard as iron. Better still, there was all but a fine full moon that night, and the puddles in Cheriton High Street shone like Chinese crystal in the beams slanting down on them from between the eaves of the houses.

For five long hours of dark, after his seven o'clock supper, Old Nollykins managed to keep himself awake. Then, a little before midnight, having assured himself that his three 'prentices were sound asleep in their bed, he groped downstairs again, gently lifted the latch and looked out. There was never such a shining scene before. The snow on the roofs and gables and carved stonework of the houses gleamed white and smooth as the finest millers' meal. There was not a soul, not even a cat, to be seen in the long stretch of the lampless street. And the stars in the grey-blue sky gleamed like dewdrops on a thorn.

Sure enough, as soon as ever the last stroke of midnight had sounded from St. Andrew's tower, there came faintly wreathing its way out of the distance the same shrill penetrating strains of the ancient tune. Lord bless me, if Old Nollykins had had but one sole drop of the blood of his own youth left in his veins he could not have resisted dancing his old bones out of his body down his steps and into the crudded High Street at the sound of it:

> *Girls and boys, come out to play!*
> *The moon doth shine as bright as day;*
> *Leave your supper, and leave your sleep,*
> *And come with your playfellows into the street!...*

But, instead, he shuffled like a rat hastily back into the house again; pushed himself in close under the staircase; and waited—leaving the door ajar.

Ho, ho, what's that? Faint flitting lights were now showing in the street, and a sound as of little unhuman cries, and in a minute or two the music loudened so that an old glass case on a table near by containing the model of a brig which had belonged to Old Nollykins' wicked grandfather who had died in Tobago, fairly rang to the marvellous stirrings on the air. And down helter-skelter from their bed, just as they had slipped in under its sacking—in their breeches and rags of day-shirts, barefoot, came whiffling from stair to stair the ghosts of his three small 'prentices. Old Nollykins hardly had time enough to see the wonderful smile on them, to catch the gleam of the grinning white teeth shining beneath their parted lips, before they were out and away.

Shivering all over, as if with the palsy, the old man hastened up the staircase, and in a minute or two the vacant house resounded with the strokes of his hammer as he drove in the ten-penny nail into the keyhole above the attic door, and hung up key and horseshoe by their strings. This done, he lowered his hammer and listened. Not the faintest whisper, sigh or squeak came from within. But in dread of what he might see he dared not open the door.

Instead, curiosity overcame him. Wrapping a cloak round his skinny shoulders he hurried out into the street. Sure enough, here, there, everywhere in the snow and hoarfrost were footprints—traces at any rate distinct enough for *his* envious eyes, though they were hardly more than those of the skirring of a hungry bird's wing on the surface of the snow. And fondly supposing in his simplicity that he had now safely cheated his 'prentices, that for ever more their poor young empty bodies would be at his beck and call, Old Noll determined to follow away out of the town and into the water-meadows the dream shapes of the children now all of them out of sight. On and on he went till his breath was whistling

in his lungs and he could scarcely drag one foot after the other.

And he came at last to where, in a loop of the Itchen, its waters shining like glass in the moon, there was a circle of pollard and stunted willows. And there, in the lush and frosty grasses was a wonderful company assembled, and unearthly music ascending, it seemed, from out of the bowels of a mound near by, called Caesar's Camp. And he heard a multitude of voices and singing from within. And all about the meadow wandered in joy the sleep-shapes not only of the children from Cheriton, but from the farms and cottages and gipsy camps for miles around. Sheep were there too, their yellow eyes gleaming in the moon as he trod past them. But none paid any heed to the children or to the 'strangers' who had called them out of their dreams.

Strange indeed were these strangers: of middle height, with garments like spider-web, their straight hair of the colour of straw falling gently on either side their narrow cheeks, so that it looked at first glimpse as if they were grey-beards. And as they trod on their narrow feet, the frozen grasses scarcely stirring beneath them, they turned their faces from side to side, looking at the children. And then a fairness that knows no change showed in their features, and their eyes were of a faint flame like that of sea-water on nights of thunder when the tide gently lays its incoming ripples on some wide flat sandy strand of the sea.

And at sight of them Old Nollykins began to be mortally afraid. Not a sign was there of Tom, Dick or Harry. They must have gone into the sonorous mound—maybe were feasting there, if dream-shapes feast. The twangling and trumpeting and incessant music made his head spin round. He peered about for a hiding-place, and at length made his way to one of the old gnarled willows beside the icy stream. There he might have remained safe and sound till morning, if the frost, as he dragged himself up a little way into the lower branches of the tree, had not risen into his nostrils and made him sneeze. There indeed he might have remained safe and sound if he had *merely* sneezed, for an old man's sneeze is not much unlike an old sheep's wheezy winter cough. But such was this poor old man's alarm and terror at the company he had stumbled into that he cried, 'God bless us!' after his sneeze—just as his mother had taught him to do.

That was the end of wicked old Nollykins; as it was his first step on the long road of repentance. For the next thing he remembered was opening his eyes in the half-light of stealing dawn and finding himself perched up in the boughs of a leafless willow-tree, a thin mist swathing the low-lying water-meadows, the sheep gently browsing in the grasses, leaving green marks in the frosty grass as they munched onwards. And such an ache and ague was in Old Noll's bones as he had never, since he was swaddled, felt before. It was as if every frosty switch of every un-polled willow in that gaunt fairy circle by the Itchen had been belabouring him of its own free will the whole night long. His heart and courage were gone. Sighing and groaning, he lowered himself into the meadow, and by the help of a fallen branch for staff made his way at last back into the town.

It was early yet even for the milkmaids, though cocks were crowing from their frosty perches, and the red of the coming sun inflamed the eastern skies. He groped into his house and shut the door. With many rests on the way from stair to stair he hoisted himself up, though every movement seemed to wrench him joint from joint, until at last he reached the attic door. He pressed his long ear against the panel and listened a moment. Not a sound. Then stealthily pushing it open inch by inch, he thrust forward his shuddering head and looked in.

The ruddy light in the East was steadily increasing, and had even pierced through the grimy panes of the dormer window as though to light up the slumbers of his small chimney-sweeps. It was a Sunday morning and their fair skins and lamb's-wool heads showed no trace of the week's soot. But while at other times on spying in at them it looked to Old Nollykins as if their smiling faces were made of wax, now they might be of alabaster. For each one of the three—Tom, Dick, and Harry—was lying on his back, their chapped, soot-roughened hands with the torn and broken nails resting on either side of their bodies. No smile now touched their features, but only a solemn quietude as of images eternally at rest. And such was the aspect of the three children that even Old Nollykins dared not attempt to waken them because he knew in his heart that no earthly rod would ever now bestir them out of this sound slumber. Not at least until their spirits had won home again. And the soured old crone was not likely to aid him in that.

He cursed the old woman, battering on her crazy door, but she paid him no heed. And at last, when the Cheriton Church bells began ringing the people to morning service, there was nothing for it, if there was any hope of saving his neck, but to go off to the Mayor's man, dragging himself along the street on a couple of sticks, to tell him that his 'prentices were dead.

Dead they were not, however. The Mayor's man fetched a doctor, and the doctor, after putting a sort of wooden trumpet

to their chests, asseverated that there was a stirring under the cage of their ribs. They were fallen into a trance, he said. What is called a *catalepsy*. It was a dreamlike seizure that would presently pass away. But though the old midwife the doctor called in heated up salt, for salt-bags, and hour by hour put a hot brick fresh from the fire to each 'prentice's stone-cold feet, by not a flutter of an eyelid nor the faintest of sighs did any one of the three prove that he was alive or could heed.

There they lay, on their straw pallet, motionless as mummies, still and serene, lovely as any mother might wish, with their solemn Sunday-morning soap-polished cheeks and noses and foreheads and chins, and as irresponsive as cherubs made of stone.

And the Mayor of the Town, after listening to all Old Nollykins could say, fined him Five Bags of Guineas for allowing his three 'prentices to fall into a catalepsy for want of decent food and nourishment. And what with the pain of his joints and the anguish of having strangers tramping all over his house, and of pleading with the Mayor, and of seeing his money fetched out from its hiding-places and counted out on the table, the miserable old man was so much dazed and confused that he never thought to take down the wreath of ash and elder and the horseshoe and the key. That is why, when a week or two had gone by and no sign had shown how long this trance would continue, the Mayor and Councillors decided that as Tom, Dick and Harry could be of no further use to the town as chimney-sweeps, they might perhaps earn an honest penny for it as the 'Marvels of the Age'.

So the Mayor's man with a flowing white muslin band round his black hat, and his two mutes—carrying bouquets of lilies in their hands—came with his handcart and fetched the three bodies away. A roomy glass case had been made for them of solid Warwickshire oak, with a fine chased lock and key. And by the time the Waits had begun to sing their Christmas carols in the snow, the three children had been installed in this case on the upper floor of the Cheriton Museum, and there lay slumbering on and on, quiet as Snow-White in the dwarfs' coffin, the gentle daylight falling fairly on their quiet faces—though during the long summer days a dark blind was customarily drawn over the glass whenever the sun shone in too fiercely at the window.

News of this wonder spread fast, and by the following Spring visitors from all over the world—even from cities as remote as Guanojuato and Seringapatam—came flocking into Warwickshire merely to gaze a while at the sleeping Chimney-Sweeps: at 6d. a time. After which a fair proportion of them went on to Stratford to view the church where lie William Shakespeare's honoured bones. Indeed Mrs. Giles, the old woman who set up an apple and ginger-bread stall beside the Museum, in a few years made so much money out of her wares that she was able to bring up her nine orphaned grandchildren all but in comfort, and to retire at last at the age of sixty to a four-roomed cottage not a hundred yards from that of Anne Hathaway's herself.

In course of time the Lord-Lieutenant and the Sheriffs and the Justices of the Peace and the Bishop and the mayors of the neighbouring towns, jealous no doubt of this fame and miracle in their midst, did their utmost to persuade and compel the Mayor and Corporation of Cheriton to remove the Boys to the county-town—the Earl himself promising to lodge them in an old house not a stone's-throw distant from the lovely shrine of his ancestors, Beauchamp Chapel. But all in vain. The people of Cheriton held tight to their rights: and the Lord Chief Justice after soberly hearing both sides at full length wagged his wigged head in their favour.

For fifty-three years the Sleeping Boys slept on. During this period the Town Council had received One Hundred and Twenty Three Thousand, Five Hundred and Fifty-Five sixpences in fees alone (i.e. £3,088 17s. 6d.). And nearly every penny of this vast sum was almost clear profit. They spent it wisely too—widened their narrow chimneys, planted lime-trees in the High Street and ash and willow beside the river, built a fountain and a large stone dove-cot, and set apart a wooded meadowland with every comfort wild creatures can hope to have bestowed on them by their taskmaster, Man.

Then, one fine day, the curator—the caretaker—of the Museum, who for forty years had never once missed dusting the 'prentices' glass case first thing in the morning, fell ill and had to take to his bed. And his niece, a pretty young thing, nimble and high-spirited, came as his deputy for a while, looked after the Museum, sold the tickets, and kept an eye on the visitors in his stead. She was only seventeen; and was the very first person who had ever been heard to sing in the Museum—though of course it was only singing with her lips all but closed, and never during show-hours.

And it was Summer-time, or rather the very first of May. And as each morning she opened the great door of the Museum and ascended the wide carved staircase and drew up the blinds of the tall windows on the upper floor, and then turned—as she always turned—to gaze at the Three Sleepers (and not even a brass farthing to pay), she would utter a deep sigh

as if out of the midst of a happy dream.

'You lovely things!' she would whisper to herself. 'You lovely, lovely things!' She had a motherly heart; and the wisps of her hair were as transparent as the E-string of a fiddle in the morning light. And the glance of her blue eyes rested on the glass case with such compassion and tenderness that if mere looking could have awakened the children they would have been dancing an Irish jig with her every blessed morning.

Being young, too, she was inclined to be careless, and had even at times broken off a tiny horn of coral, or a half-hidden scale from the mermaid's tail for a souvenir of Cheriton to any young stranger that particularly took her fancy. Moreover, she had never been told anything about the magicry of keys or horseshoes or iron or ash or elder, having been brought up at a School where wizardry and witchcraft were never so much as mentioned during school hours. How could she realize then that the little key of the glass case and the great key of the Museum door (which, after opening both, she had dropped out of her pocket by accident plump into the garden well) could keep anybody or anything out, or in, even when the doors were wide open? Or that water can wash even witchcraft away?

That very morning there had been such a pomp of sunshine in the sky, and the thrushes were singing so shrilly in the new-leafed lime trees as she came along to her work, that she could resist her pity and yearning no longer. Having drawn up the blinds on the upper floor, in the silence she gently raised the three glass lids of the great glass case and propped them back fully open. And one by one—after first listening at their lips as stealthily as if in hope of hearing what their small talk might be in their dreams—she kissed the slumbering creatures on their stone-cold mouths. And as she kissed Harry she fancied she heard a step upon the stair. And she ran out at once to see.

No one. Instead, as she stood on the wide staircase listening, her young face tilted and intent, there came a waft up it as of spiced breezes from the open spaces of Damascus. Not a sound, no more than a breath, faint and yet almost unendurably sweet of Spring—straight across from the bird-haunted, sheep-grazed meadows skirting the winding river: the perfume of a whisper. It was as if a distant memory had taken presence and swept in delight across her eyes. Then stillness again, broken by the sounding as of a voice smaller than the horn of a gnat. And then a terrible sharp crash of glass. And out pell-mell came rushing our three young friends, the chimney-sweeps, their dream-shapes home at last.

Now Old Nollykins by this time had long been laid in his grave. So even if anyone had been able to catch them, Tom, Dick, and Harry would have swept no more chimneys for him. Nor could even the new Mayor manage it. Nor the complete Town Council. Nor the Town Crier, though he cried twice a day to the end of the year: 'O-yess! O-yess!! O-yess!!! Lost, stolen, or strayed: Three World-Famous and Notorious Sleeping Boys of Warwickshire.' Nor even the Lord-Lieutenant. Nor even the mighty Earl.

As for the mound by the pollard willows—well, what clever Wide-awake would ever be able to give any news of that?

[The end of *The Three Sleeping Boys of Warwickshire* by Walter de la Mare]