

THE DUENDE GIRL

ONCE there was a little girl. One day this little girl, who had been playing down by the brook, ran into the hut where her mother was grinding corn and cried, "Nana! Stop grinding and look at all this nice new money I bring." When the mother looked she saw only leaves in the child's hands, so she said, "Not nice new money I see, but dry leaves of the ec tree." Then the little girl sat on the earthen floor and cried. The mother had finished grinding and was sitting at her loom when the little girl again came in from play calling, "Nana! Stop weaving and look at my beautiful rings." Now the mother's heart was troubled when she saw that each of the child's fingers bore rings of corn husk and she sighed as she said, "Yes, yes, little sweetheart, rings of corn husk." Then the little girl sat down again on the floor and cried until she fell asleep.

When the little girl's father came home after his day's work in the milpa was over, the mother told him what had happened and he was as troubled as she, for they knew that their little daughter was loved by the Duende and that unless they could free her from his attentions, she would never be able to distinguish the false from the true and would die young.

The little girl wore the Duende rings and played with the Duende money until she was a big girl and all this time her parents were sad and uneasy.

One day as the girl sat weaving she said, "I wish I had some nice sweets." Immediately a shower of sweets fell about her from the rafters of the hut, but when she offered some of them to her mother, they changed to dry shells of the corozo nut.

Years passed. The Duende always gave the girl just what she asked for, but his gifts seemed destined for her alone, for whenever she attempted to share them with anyone else they changed to something worthless.

At last a young man, a strong, straight, bright-eyed, red-skinned lad, fell in love with the girl and his parents sent presents to her parents and in due time the young man was accepted as the girl's suitor.

It was understood that when the harvest was over the young people should drink the betrothal cup and be married.

One beautiful evening after the last ripe ear had been stored in the corn house, the girl met her lover just as he was about to cross the threshold and after placing the guacal of chocolate to her own lips, offered it to him, but just as he was about to carry it to his mouth the foamy chocolate changed to muddy water. Casting the guacal from him he exclaimed, "Thou art then a Duende girl." There were four sad hearts in the hut that night, but before the young man wrapped himself in his blanket and went to lie down in his own corner he said to the girl's parents, "I really and truly love your daughter and with your permission I shall go out even at daybreak to seek the old wise man of the mountain, for he, if anyone, can tell me how to free her from the Duende."

The old people gladly consented and they as well as the girl were up to see him start on his long journey. The Duende was there, too, for when the lovers were taking leave of each other he threw dust in their eyes and scratched their faces.

The young man was gone many moons and when he returned he said never a word. When night came they all retired as usual, but hardly had they fallen asleep when they were awakened by such music as was never heard before. First it sounded like the song of a bird and then like the laugh of a maiden, then like the breeze playing with the palm leaves. The patter, patter of the rain drops on the grass while the sun still shines was next heard, then the sunlight went out and there was only the drop, drop of the rain. The breeze came back and sighed for a while, then the wind rose and moaned and complained, to be quickly followed by a wailing that made the blood of the listener run cold.

All at once there was a sound as of someone breaking a reed, then all was silent. "Now," cried the young man springing up, "we are rid of the Duende at last."

Then he said to the girl and her parents that the wise old man of the mountain had given him a flute and told him to lay it at the door of the hut when night fell and that the Duende would play it, then break it and go away never to trouble his beloved again. Stepping outside, the lad picked up the pieces of the flute and showing them to the girl said, "I am thirsty. Give me to drink." And when the maiden brought the guacal full of foamy chocolate he drank their marriage draught.