

BARNEY BROWN AND THE CHRISTMAS CAKE

By Sophie Masson

Appears here with the kind permission of the author.

BARNEY BROWN WOKE UP SUDDENLY. The sun shone through the windows of his den and he thought it was spring. So up he got and looked out.

‘Oh my goodness,’ said Barney Brown. It didn’t look like spring out there. Yes, the sun was shining but the ground was all snowy and so were the fir trees. It was still winter!

‘Dearie me,’ said Barney Brown, and he was about to go back to bed when all at once he spotted something bright, at the corner of the glade. It was a tree, a small tree, but not covered in snow, like the others. This tree sparkled in the sun with what looked like red and green and silver berries. And under the tree was a little table, with a little man in a pointy cap standing behind it. On the table was a tray of round dark things.

‘What’s that?’ said Barney Brown, wrinkling his nose, for just then, a smell came to him. A rich, wonderful smell! A smell that made his stomach rumble and his mouth water.

Out stepped Barney Brown, into the winter snow. He’d never gone outside in the winter before and it felt funny, though of course he had a fur coat on so he wasn’t cold at all.

Pad, pad he went, making big paw-shaped patterns in the soft snow.

‘Mmm, mmm,’ said Barney Brown, as he got closer and closer to the sparkly tree, and the little table, and the glorious smell. Oh, the glorious SMELL!

‘Hello,’ said Barney Brown, politely, to the little man in the pointy cap. Now any other person might have run away, seeing a big brown bear come lumbering up, but not this person. Oh no! He was a Christmas elf, and they are not scared of anything.

‘Hello back,’ said the elf. ‘Have you come for one of my Christmas cakes?’

‘I think I have,’ said Barney Brown, happily, looking down at the table.

‘Good.’ The elf picked up a cake. ‘That will be one silver coin,’ he said.

‘I don’t have any money,’ Barney Brown said, sadly.

‘Then take a cake with my compliments,’ said the elf. ‘After all, it’s not every day a bear wakes up in winter.’

Barney Brown didn’t wait to be told twice. The cake tasted as delicious as it smelled and he licked his lips to catch the last crumb. Then he looked longingly at the rest of the cakes. He could easily have eaten them all!

‘Sorry,’ said the elf, ‘but that’s it. It’s Christmas Eve and all my other customers will be coming to pick up their Christmas cakes. Besides, they might be a bit scared if they see a bear out and about in winter.’

‘I see,’ said Barney Brown, even more sadly. But as he turned to plod off, the elf said, ‘Wait!’

Barney Brown thought he had changed his mind. But no, the elf just handed him a leaflet. ‘Christmas cake recipe’ it read.

‘Oh. Thank you,’ said Barney Brown, doubtfully.

‘Now you can make your own, with this magic recipe,’ said the elf. ‘Merry Christmas!’

Back home, Barney Brown looked at the recipe.

‘Flour, butter, sugar, eggs, dried fruit, nuts,’ he read out loud. ‘And some honey,’ he added. ‘It doesn’t say honey in the recipe, but I’m sure that’s a mistake. All cakes must have honey.’

He opened his cupboards. There was plenty of honey. Jars and jars of it. And some flour and sugar. Even frozen butter he’d forgotten in the back pantry. But no eggs. No dried fruits. No nuts.

The elf had said the recipe was magic. But how?

Barney Brown waved the recipe about. ‘I need eggs, fruit and nuts,’ he told it. Nothing happened. ‘Abracadabra, eggs, fruit, nuts!’ he tried again. Nothing happened.

‘Oh dear,’ said Barney Brown. ‘I think the elf made a mistake. The recipe isn’t magic at all. Now let me think. If it was spring, I could go into the forest and find birds’ eggs. If it was summer, I could find berries. If it was autumn, I could find nuts. But it’s winter, and I don’t know what I can find. Maybe I have to get someone to help me. Someone who is usually awake in the winter.’

He went out again. The table was gone, and the cakes, and the elf. But the sparkly tree was still there. And a fox was sitting under it. A fox with a beautiful white coat.

'Hello,' said Barney Brown.

'Hello back,' said the fox, a little surprised to see a bear out and about.

'I wonder if you can help me,' said Barney Brown. 'I'm making a Christmas cake, and I don't have any eggs or fruit or nuts.'

'Well,' said the fox, 'There are some hens I know. They'll give me eggs.'

'Really?' said Barney Brown, politely. 'That is very kind of them.'

'I will bring you back a basket full,' said the fox, and she trotted off.

How nice people are, thought Barney Brown and he was about to plod off again when a voice said, 'Has Belladonna gone?'

'Er—maybe. Only I don't know who Belladonna is,' said Barney Brown, looking around for the person who had spoken.

'That fox,' said the voice. A lump of snow moved. Only it wasn't a lump of snow, it was a hare, with pure white fur.

'Hello,' said Barney Brown.

'Hello back,' said the hare. 'Why aren't you sleeping? Bears always sleep in the winter.'

'Yes. Only today I woke up. Because I smelled a smell,' said Barney Brown. 'Christmas cake smell! And now I'm going to make my own. Only I haven't got any fruit, or nuts.'

'I've got some fruit,' said the hare, at once. 'Blackberries in a jar. Will that do?'

'Oh yes!' said Barney Brown. 'That will do very well.'

'Then I'll fetch it,' said the hare, and off he bounded.

People are really very nice, thought Barney Brown, just as a squirrel hopped down from a branch of the sparkly tree. She had been hiding behind a red bauble almost the same colour as her fur.

'Hello,' she said.

'Hello back,' said Barney Brown.

'I heard everything,' said the squirrel.

'Oh,' said Barney Brown. 'I'm sorry to disturb you.'

'Not at all,' said the squirrel. 'Now then. Snowy has blackberries, and Belladonna has eggs. Guess what I have?'

'Nuts?' asked Barney Brown.

The squirrel looked a little disappointed that he'd guessed so easily, but she nodded. 'Yes. I have nuts! Lots of nuts! A pantry full of them! How many do you need?'

'I think a few,' said Barney Brown, cautiously.

'Very well. I'll bring lots!' said the squirrel. 'Never let it be said that Hazel Conker is stingy!' And off she scampered.

People are very very nice indeed, thought Barney Brown, as he went padded off. Now I can make my Christmas cake.

Back home, he took out a bowl, and put in the flour and the sugar. He melted the butter. Just then there was a knock on the door. It was Belladonna, with six eggs. Two brown eggs and two white eggs and two speckled eggs.

'Thank you,' said Barney Brown. 'And please stay,' he added politely.

Now came another knock on the door. It was Snowy the hare, with a jar of blackberries. 'Thank you,' said Barney Brown. 'And please stay.'

Snowy looked at Belladonna warming herself by the stove. 'It's all right. We are all friends here,' said Barney Brown. 'Isn't that right, Belladonna?'

'Of course,' grinned the fox.

Just then came the third knock on the door. And there was Hazel Conker, with a bag of nuts that was almost as big as she was.

'Thank you,' said Barney Brown. 'And please stay.'

While his new friends watched, Barney Brown chopped and mixed and beat and stirred. In went the nuts and the fruit and the eggs, joining the butter and the sugar and the flour. 'And last but certainly not least,' said Barney Brown, 'in goes the honey.'

'It looks wonderful,' said Hazel and Snowy and Belladonna, crowding around to look.

'But the smell,' said Barney Brown, anxiously. 'What about the smell?'

'You have to wait,' Belladonna said.

'For the cake to cook,' said Snowy.

'Put it in the oven,' said Hazel.

So Barney Brown did. While they waited for that cake to cook, they played cards and drank pine tea and talked. When night fell and the stars came out, it was time

for Barney Brown to open the oven. All his new friends crowded around, sniffing the air.

‘That smell!’ said Belladonna, as Barney Brown lifted the cake tin out.

‘That amazing smell!’ said Snowy, as Barney Brown put it on the table.

‘That is the best smell ever!’ said Hazel Conker.

But Barney Brown could not speak. That glorious smell was filling his nostrils and he had new friends around him to share the delicious cake they had made together. And it seemed to him he could hear an elf’s voice on the air: I told you it was a magic recipe. Merry Christmas, Barney Brown!

