



THE
CHRISTMAS
SLEEPER



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Illustrations
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Inkijkexemplaar



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The big house with four pillars

Some years ago, a spacious country house was up for sale in Veurne, a picturesque town in a part of West Flanders called 'Bachten de Kupe' – Behind the Basin – because it is sandwiched between the river Yser basin, the coast and the French border.

All things considered, it was actually much more than a country house. Some people even called it a castle. Counting the sixteen rooms under its roof, it had four floors. In front of its grand front door, which was not so far from the street, was a terrace, from which four steps took you down to the path that led to the entrance gate. Hidden beneath that terrace, down another four steps, a dark-brown painted door gave access to the cellars. A black wrought iron door handle, a guardian snake, coiled menacingly above its keyhole.

In the ballroom on the first floor, hundreds of crystal teardrops sparkled in chandeliers two metres in diameter and just as many metres high. To replace a lightbulb, servants had to drag out the longest ladder.

It had more than twenty rungs.

One curtain could have made two duvet covers. And with some clever cutting, also a cushion for the dog's bed. That's how long the draperies gracing the windows were.

On the south side of the house was an enormous garden. If you walked along all of its paths, you would be walking for more than two hours.

I have to mention here that I have very long legs and walk as if I am wearing seven-league boots. It would probably take most other people three hours. From the rectangular pond, there was a beautiful view of the building. Four pillars supported a huge canopy.

It was said that the architect had a thing about the number four.

Unfortunately, that story that can no longer be verified; the man died shortly after building his masterpiece, long before I was born.

The estate was not up for sale for long. A young French couple soon made an appointment with August, the Veurne notary, to sign the deed of purchase.

A clerk opened the front door of the stately Notary House and led the couple through to the waiting room. Madame Dorbien gave a little giggle behind her elegant hand and looked at her husband in surprise. He gazed back sternly, seeing in her eyes that she was close to bursting out laughing.

It was certainly an odd sight. Although it was only early September, the clerk was wrapped up as if it was midwinter. A wool scarf was wound so tightly around his face that they could barely hear him speak. It was only when they entered the notary's immense office that they understood why.

Notary August, who looked terrifying, slowly read aloud the six pages of the deed. The steely screech of his voice sent chills down everyone's spine. Madame Dorbien saw how the shrill sound made the poor clerk's ears tremble as he turned the pages for the notary. The painful frown on his forehead increased her feelings of pity and guilt.

'Ça suffit, maître. That's enough. We're buying the house,' she exclaimed as she grabbed the documents from under the notary's nose.

'Gustave, s'il vous plaît, just go ahead and sign,' she implored her husband and hurried from the room.



Madame Dorbien and Firmin, the couple's only child, moved into the house almost immediately. Monsieur Dorbien, a prominent businessman, travelled back and forth to Paris to supervise his many offices and workshops there.

Many happy years passed by. Papa Dorbien worked hard, Mama Dorbien was too indulgent and son Firmin, who had realised early on in life that work was not to be his lot, liked to sleep late.

Suddenly, disaster struck.

