



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Treasure Castle

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



Once upon a time a hunter was roaming through the wildwood when he heard a voice crying piteously for aid. Following the sound, the hunter plunged ahead, and discovered a dwarf caught in a pit which had been dug to trap wild animals.

After the hunter had rescued the dwarf from his prison, the little man said to him: "Go ten leagues to the north till you arrive at a gigantic pine; then turn to the east, and go ten leagues more till you come to a black castle. Enter the castle without fear, and you will discover a round room in which stands a round ebony table laden with gold and jewels. Help yourself to the treasure, and return home at once. And do not—now mark me well—go up into the turret of the castle; for if you do, evil will come of it."

So the hunter thanked the dwarf, and after making sure that he had plenty of bread and cheese in his knapsack, hurried northwards as fast as his legs could carry him. Through bramble and brier, through valley and wooded dale went he, and at dusk he came to a gigantic pine standing solitary in a rocky field. Wearied with his long journey, the hunter lay down beneath the pine and slept.

When it was dawn he woke refreshed, and turning his eyes toward the level rays of the rising sun, began his journey to the east. Presently he reached a height in the forest, and from this height, he saw, not very far away, a black turret rising over the ocean of bright leaves. At high noon he arrived at the castle. It was ruinous and quite deserted; grass grew in the courtyard and between the bricks of the terrace, and the oaken door was as soft and rotten as a log that has long been buried in mire.

Entering the castle, the hunter soon discovered the round room. A table laden with wonderful treasures stood in the centre of the chamber, directly under a shower of sunlight pouring through a half-ruined window in the mildewed wall. How the diamonds and precious stones sparkled and gleamed!

Now, while the hunter was filling his pockets, the flash of a jewel lying on the floor happened to catch his eye, and looking down, he saw that a kind of trail of jewels lay along the floor leading out of the room. Following the scattered gems,—which had the appearance of having been spilled from some treasure-casket heaped too high,—the hunter came to a low door, and opening this door, he discovered a flight of stone steps leading to the turret. The steps were strewn carelessly with the finest emeralds, topazes, beryls, moonstones, rubies, and crystal diamonds.

Remembering the counsel of his friend the dwarf, however, the hunter did not go up the stairs, but hurried home with his treasure.

When the hunter returned to his country, the wonderful treasures which he had taken from the castle in the wood made him a very rich man, and in a short time the news of his prosperity came to the ears of the King. This King was the wickedest of rogues, and his two best friends, the Chamberlain and the Chancellor, were every bit as unscrupulous as he. They oppressed the people with taxes, they stole from the poor, they robbed the churches; indeed there was no injustice which they were not ready to commit. So, when the Chamberlain

heard of the hunter's wealth, he—being a direct, straightforward rascal—declared that the simplest thing to do would be to kill the hunter and take his money.

The Chancellor, who was somewhat more cunning and worldly, declared that it would be better to throw the hunter into a foul, dark dungeon till he was ready to buy his freedom with all his wealth.

The King, who was the wickedest and wisest of the precious three, declared that the best thing to do was to find out whence the hunter had got his treasure, so that, if there happened to be any left, they could go and get it. Then of course, they could kill the hunter and take his treasure too.

Thus it came to pass that by a royal order the hunter was thrown into a horrible prison, and told that his only hope of release lay in revealing the origin of his riches. So, after he had been slowly starved and cruelly beaten, he told of the treasure castle in the wood.

On the following morning, the King, the Chamberlain, and the Chancellor, taking with them some strong linen bags and some pack mules, rode forth in quest of the treasure. Great was their joy when they found the treasure castle and the treasure room just as the hunter had described. The Chancellor poured the shining gems through his claw-like fingers, and the King and the Chamberlain threw their arms around each others' shoulders and danced a jig as well as their age and dignity would permit. The first fine careless rapture over, they began pouring the treasure into the linen sacks they had brought with them, and these, filled to the brim, they carried to the castle door.

Soon not the tiniest gem was left on the table. Suddenly the Chamberlain happened to catch sight of the gems strewn along the floor.

“See, see!” he cried, his voice shrill and greedy. “There is yet more to be had!”

So the three rogues got down on their hands and knees and began stuffing the stray jewels into their bulging pockets. The trail of jewels led them across the hall to the little door opening on the stairway, and up this stairway they scrambled as fast as they could go.

At the top of the stair, in the turret, they found another round room lit by three narrow, barred windows, and in the centre of this turret chamber, likewise laden with gold and jewels, they found another ebony table. With shrieks of delight, the King and the Chancellor and the Chamberlain ran to this second treasure, and plunged their hands in the glittering golden mass.

Suddenly, a great bell rang in the castle, a great brazen bell whose deep clang beat about them in throbbing, singing waves.

“What's that?” said the three rogues in one breath, and rushed together to the door.

It was locked! An instant later there was a heavy explosion which threw them all to the floor, tossing the treasure over them; and then, wonder of wonders, the castle turret, with the three

rogues imprisoned in it, detached itself from the rest of the castle, and flew off into the air. From the barred windows, the King, the Chamberlain, and the Chancellor saw league upon league of the forest rushing by beneath them. Suddenly the flying room began to descend swiftly, and landed lightly as a bird in the middle of a castle courtyard. Strange-looking fellows with human bodies and heads of horses came rushing toward the enchanted turret, and seized its prisoners. In a few moments they were brought before the King to whom the treasure belonged.

Now this King was a brother of the dwarf whom the hunter had rescued from the pit. He had a little gold crown on his head, and sat on a little golden throne with cushions of crimson velvet.

“With what are these three charged?” said the Dwarf-King.

“With having tried to rob the treasure castle, Your Majesty,” replied one of the horse-headed servitors in a firm, stable tone.

“Then send for the Lord Chief Justice at once,” said the Dwarf-King.

The three culprits were left standing uneasily in a kind of cage. They would have tried to speak, but every time they opened their mouths, one of the guards gave them a dig in the ribs.

For a space of five minutes there was quiet in the crowded throne-room, a quiet broken now and then by a veiled cough or the noise of shuffling feet. Presently, from far away, came the clear, sweet call of silver trumpets.

“He’s coming! He’s coming!” murmured many voices. A buzz of excitement filled the room. Several people had to be revived with smelling salts.

The trumpets sounded a second time. The excitement increased.

The trumpets sounded a third time, near at hand. A man’s voice announced in solemn tones, “The Lord Chief Justice approaches.”

The audience grew very still. Hardly a rustle or a flutter was heard. Suddenly the great tapestry curtains which overhung the door parted, and there appeared, first of all, an usher, clad in red velvet and carrying a golden wand; then came two golden-haired pages, also clad in red velvet and carrying a flat black-lacquer box on a velvet cushion. Last of all came an elderly man dressed in black, and carrying a golden perch on which sat a fine green parrot. On reaching the centre of the hall, the parrot flapped its wings, arranged an upstart feather or two, and then resumed that solemn dignity for which birds and animals are so justly famous.

With great ceremony the gentleman in black placed the Lord Chief Justice on a lacquer stand close by the throne of the Dwarf-King.

Trumpets sounded. Two servitors hurried forward with the captive King.

“Your Venerability,” spoke the Dwarf-King to the parrot, who watched him intently out of its round yellow eye, and nodded its head, “this rascal has been taken in the act of robbing the treasure castle. What punishment do you suggest?”

At these words, the two golden-haired pages, advancing with immense solemnity, lifted the lacquer box to within reach of the parrot’s beak. The box was full of cards. Over them, swaying from one leg to the other as he did so, the parrot swept his head.

An icy silence fell over the throng. The King, the Chancellor, and the Chamberlain quaked in their shoes. Presently the parrot picked out a card, and the gentleman in black handed it to the Dwarf-King.

“Prisoner,” said the Dwarf-King to the other King, “the Lord Chief Justice condemns you to be for the rest of your natural life Master Sweeper of the Palace Chimneys.”

Discreet applause was heard. The Chancellor was then hurried forward, and the bird picked out a second card.

“Prisoner,” said the Dwarf-King, “the Lord Chief Justice condemns you to be for the rest of your natural life Master Washer of the Palace Windows.”

More discreet applause was heard. And now the Chamberlain was brought to the bar. The parrot gave him quite a wicked eye, and hesitated for some time before drawing a card.

“Prisoner,” said the Dwarf-King, reading the card which the parrot had finally chosen, “the Lord Chief Justice condemns you for the rest of your natural life to be Master Beater of the Palace Carpets.”

Great applause followed this sage judgment.

So the three rogues were led away, and unless you have heard to the contrary, they are still making up for their wicked lives by enforced diligence at their tasks. The palace has five hundred and ninety-six chimneys, eight thousand, seven hundred and fifty-three windows, and eleven hundred and ninety-nine large dust-gathering carpets, and the chimneys, windows, and carpets have to be swept, washed, and beaten at least once a week.

Now when the King, the Chancellor, and the Chamberlain failed to return, the people took the hunter out of his prison and made him king, because he was the richest and most powerful of them all.

As for the treasure of the treasure castle, it is still there, packed in the linen sacks, lying just inside the great door.

Perhaps some day you may find it. If you do, don’t be greedy, and don’t go up to the turret chamber.

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