

The Golden Snuff-box

Flora Annie Steel

Once upon a time, and a very good time too, though it was not in my time, nor your time, nor for the matter of that in any one's time, there lived a man and a woman who had one son called Jack, and he was just terribly fond of reading books. He read, and he read, and then, because his parents lived in a lonely house in a lonely forest and he never saw any other folk but his father and his mother, he became quite crazy to go out into the world and see charming princesses and the like.

So one day he told his mother he must be off, and she called him an air-brained addle-pate, but added that, as he was no use at home, he had better go seek his fortune. Then she asked him if he would rather take a small cake with her blessing to eat on his journey, or a large cake with her curse? Now Jack was a very hungry lad, so he just up and said:

“A big cake, if you please, 'm.”

So his mother made a great big cake, and when he started she just off to the top of the house and cast malisons on him, till he got out of sight. You see she had to do it, but after that she sate down and cried.

Well, Jack hadn't gone far till he came to a field where his father was ploughing. Now the goodman was dreadfully put out when he found his son was going away, and still more so when he heard he had chosen his mother's malison. So he cast about what to do to put things straight, and at last he drew out of his pocket a little golden snuff-box, and gave it to the lad, saying:

“If ever you are in danger of sudden death you may open the box; but not till then. It has been in our family for years and years; but, as we have lived, father and son, quietly in the forest, none of us have ever been in need of help—perhaps you may.”

So Jack pocketed the golden snuff-box and went on his way.

Now, after a time, he grew very tired, and very hungry, for he had eaten his big cake first thing, and night closed in on him so that he could scarce see his way.

But at last he came to a large house and begged board and lodging at the back door. Now Jack was a good-looking young fellow, so the maid-servant at once called him in to the fireside and gave him plenty good meat and bread and beer. And it so happened that while he was eating his supper the master's gay young daughter came into the kitchen and saw him. So she went to her father and said that there was the prettiest young fellow she had ever seen in the back kitchen,

and that if her father loved her he would give the young man some employment. Now the gentleman of the house was exceedingly fond of his gay young daughter, and did not want to vex her; so he went into the back kitchen and questioned Jack as to what he could do.

“Anything,” said Jack gaily, meaning, of course, that he could do any foolish bit of work about a house.

But the gentleman saw a way of pleasing his gay young daughter and getting rid of the trouble of employing Jack; so he laughs and says, “If you can do anything, my good lad,” says he, “you had better do this. By eight o’clock to-morrow morning you must have dug a lake four miles round in front of my mansion, and on it there must be floating a whole fleet of vessels. And they must range up in front of my mansion and fire a salute of guns. And the very last shot must break the leg of the four-post bed on which my daughter sleeps, for she is always late of a morning!”

Well! Jack was terribly flabbergasted, but he faltered out:

“And if I don’t do it?”

“Then,” said the master of the house quite calmly, “your life will be the forfeit.”

So he bade the servants take Jack to a turret-room and lock the door on him.

Well! Jack sate on the side of his bed and tried to think things out, but he felt as if he didn’t know b from a battledore, so he decided to think no more, and after saying his prayers he lay down and went to sleep. And he did sleep! When he woke it was close on eight o’clock, and he had only time to fly to the window and look out, when the great clock on the tower began to whirr before it struck the hour. And there was the lawn in front of the house all set with beds of roses and stocks and marigolds! Well! all of a sudden he remembered the little golden snuff-box.

“I’m near enough to death,” quoth he to himself, as he drew it out and opened it.

And no sooner had he opened it than out hopped three funny little red men in red night-caps, rubbing their eyes and yawning; for, see you, they had been locked up in the box for years, and years, and years.

“What do you want, Master?” they said between their yawns. But Jack heard that clock a-whirring and knew he hadn’t a moment to lose, so he just gabbled off his orders. Then the clock began to strike, and the little men flew out of the window, and suddenly

Bang! bang! bang! bang! bang!

went the guns, and the last one must have broken the leg of the four-post bed, for there at the window was the gay young daughter in her nightcap, gazing with astonishment at the lake four miles round, with the fleet of vessels floating on it!

And so did Jack! He had never seen such a sight in his life, and he was quite sorry when the three little red men disturbed him by flying in at the window and scrambling into the golden snuff-box.

“Give us a little more time when you want us next, Master,” they said sulkily. Then they shut down the lid, and Jack could hear them yawning inside as they settled down to sleep.

As you may imagine, the master of the house was fair astonished, while as for the gay young daughter, she declared at once that she would never marry any one else but the young man who could do such wonderful things; the truth being that she and Jack had fallen in love with each other at first sight.

But her father was cautious. “It is true, my dear,” says he, “that the young fellow seems a bully boy; but for aught we know it may be chance, not skill, and he may have a broken feather in his wing. So we must try him again.”

Then he said to Jack, “My daughter must have a fine house to live in. Therefore by to-morrow morning at eight o’clock there must be a magnificent castle standing on twelve golden pillars in the middle of the lake, and there must be a church beside it. And all things must be ready for the bride, and at eight o’clock precisely a peal of bells from the church must ring out for the wedding. If not you will have to forfeit your life.”

This time Jack intended to give the three little red men more time for their task; but what with having enjoyed himself so much all day, and having eaten so much good food, he overslept himself, so that the big clock on the tower was whirring before it struck eight when he woke, leapt out of bed, and rushed to the golden snuff-box. But he had forgotten where he had put it, and so the clock had really begun to strike before he found it under his pillow, opened it, and gabbled out his orders. And then you never saw how the three little red men tumbled over each other and yawned and stretched and made haste all at one time, so that Jack thought his life would surely be forfeit. But just as the clock struck its last chime, out rang a peal of merry bells, and there was the Castle standing on twelve golden pillars and a church beside it in the middle of the lake. And the Castle was all decorated for the wedding, and there were crowds and crowds of servants and retainers, all dressed in their Sunday best.

Never had Jack seen such a sight before; neither had the gay young daughter who, of course, was looking out of the next window in her nightcap. And she looked so pretty and so gay

that Jack felt quite cross when he had to step back to let the three little red men fly to their golden snuff-box. But they were far crosser than he was, and mumbled and grumbled at the hustle, so that Jack was quite glad when they shut the box down and began to snore.

Well, of course, Jack and the gay young daughter were married, and were as happy as the day is long; and Jack had fine clothes to wear, fine food to eat, fine servants to wait on him, and as many fine friends as he liked.

So he was in luck; but he had yet to learn that a mother's malison is sure to bring misfortune some time or another.

Thus it happened that one day when he was going a-hunting with all the ladies and gentlemen, Jack forgot to change the golden snuff-box (which he always carried about with him for fear of accidents) from his waistcoat pocket to that of his scarlet hunting-coat; so he left it behind him. And what should happen but that the servant let it fall on the ground when he was folding up the clothes, and the snuff-box flew open and out popped the three little red men yawning and stretching.

Well! when they found out that they hadn't really been summoned, and that there was no fear of death, they were in a towering temper and said they had a great mind to fly away with the Castle, golden pillars and all.

On hearing this the servant pricked up his ears.

"Could you do that?" he asked.

"Could we?" they said, and they laughed loud. "Why, we can do anything."

Then the servant said ever so sharp, "Then move me this Castle and all it contains right away over the sea where the master can't disturb us."

Now the little red men need not really have obeyed the order, but they were so cross with Jack that hardly had the servant said the words before the task was done; so when the hunting-party came back, lo and behold! the Castle, and the church, and the golden pillars had all disappeared!

At first all the rest set upon Jack for being a knave and a cheat; and, in particular, his wife's father threatened to have at him for deceiving the gay young daughter; but at last he agreed to let Jack have twelve months and a day to find the Castle and bring it back.

So off Jack starts on a good horse with some money in his pocket.

And he travelled far and he travelled fast, and he travelled east and west, north and south, over hills, and dales, and valleys, and mountains, and woods, and sheepwalks, but never a sign of the missing castle did he see. Now at last he came to the palace of the King of all the Mice in the Wide World. And there was a little mousie in a fine hauberk and a steel cap doing sentry at the front gate, and he was not for letting Jack in until he had told his errand. And when Jack had told it, he passed him on to the next mouse sentry at the inner gate; so by degrees he reached the King's chamber, where he sate surrounded by mice courtiers.

Now the King of the Mice received Jack very graciously, and said that he himself knew nothing of the missing Castle, but, as he was King of all the Mice in the whole world, it was possible that some of his subjects might know more than he. So he ordered his chamberlain to command a Grand Assembly for the next morning, and in the meantime he entertained Jack right royally.

But the next morning, though there were brown mice, and black mice, and grey mice, and white mice, and piebald mice, from all parts of the world, they all answered with one breath:

"If it please your Majesty, we have not seen the missing Castle."

Then the King said, "You must go and ask my elder brother the King of all the Frogs. He may be able to tell you. Leave your horse here and take one of mine. It knows the way and will carry you safe."

So Jack set off on the King's horse, and as he passed the outer gate he saw the little mouse sentry coming away, for its guard was up. Now Jack was a kind-hearted lad, and he had saved some crumbs from his dinner in order to recompense the little sentry for his kindness. So he put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the crumbs.

"Here you are, mousekin," he said. "That's for your trouble!"

Then the mouse thanked him kindly and asked if he would take him along to the King of the Frogs.

"Not I," says Jack. "I should get into trouble with your King."

But the mousekin insisted. "I may be of some use to you," it said. So it ran up the horse's hind leg and up by its tail and hid in Jack's pocket. And the horse set off at a hard gallop, for it didn't half like the mouse running over it.

So at last Jack came to the palace of the King of all the Frogs, and there at the front gate was a frog doing sentry in a fine coat of mail and a brass helmet. And the frog sentry was for not

letting Jack in; but the mouse called out that they came from the King of all the Mice and must be let in without delay. So they were taken to the King's chamber, where he sate surrounded by frog courtiers in fine clothes; but alas! he had heard nothing of the Castle on golden pillars, and though he summoned all the frogs of all the world to a Grand Assembly next morning, they all answered his question with:

“Kro kro, Kro kro”

which every one knows stands for “No” in frog language.

So the King said to Jack, “There remains but one thing. You must go and ask my eldest brother, the King of all the Birds. His subjects are always on the wing, so mayhap they have seen something. Leave the horse you are riding here, and take one of mine. It knows the way, and will carry you safe.”

So Jack set off, and being a kind-hearted lad he gave the frog sentry, whom he met coming away from his guard, some crumbs he had saved from his dinner. And the frog asked leave to go with him, and when Jack refused to take him he just gave one hop on to the stirrup, and a second hop on to the crupper, and the next hop he was in Jack's other pocket.

Then the horse galloped away like lightning, for it didn't like the slimy frog coming down “plop” on its back.

Well, after a time, Jack came to the palace of the King of all the Birds, and there at the front gate were a sparrow and a crow marching up and down with matchlocks on their shoulders. Now at this Jack laughed fit to split, and the mouse and the frog from his pockets called out:

“We come from the King! Sirrahs! Let us pass.”

So that the sentries were right mazed, and let them pass in without more ado.

But when they came to the King's chamber, where he sate surrounded by all manner of birds, tomtits, wrens, cormorants, turtle-doves, and the like, the King said he was sorry, but he had no news of the missing Castle. And though he summoned all the birds of all the world to a Grand Assembly next morning, not one of them had seen or heard tell of it.

So Jack was quite disconsolate till the King said, “But where is the eagle? I don't see my eagle.”

Then the Chamberlain—he was a tomtit—stepped forward with a bow and said:

“May it please your Majesty he is late.”

“Late?” says the King in a fume. “Summon him at once.”

So two larks flew up into the sky till they couldn’t be seen and sang ever so loud, till at last the eagle appeared all in a perspiration from having flown so fast.

Then the King said, “Sirrah! Have you seen a missing Castle that stands upon twelve pillars of gold?”

And the eagle blinked its eyes and said, “May it please your Majesty that is where I’ve been.”

Then everybody rejoiced exceedingly, and when the eagle had eaten a whole calf so as to be strong enough for the journey, he spread his wide wings, on which Jack stood, with the mouse in one pocket and the frog in the other, and started to obey the King’s order to take the owner back to his missing Castle as quickly as possible.

And they flew over land and they flew over sea, until at last in the far distance they saw the Castle standing on its twelve golden pillars. But all the doors and windows were fast shut and barred, for, see you, the servant-master who had run away with it had gone out for the day a-hunting, and he always bolted doors and windows while he was absent lest some one else should run away with it.

Then Jack was puzzled to think how he should get hold of the golden snuff-box, until the little mouse said:

“Let me fetch it. There is always a mouse-hole in every castle, so I am sure I shall be able to get in.”

So it went off, and Jack waited on the eagle’s wings in a fume; till at last mousekin appeared.

“Have you got it?” shouted Jack, and the little mousie cried:

“Yes!”

So every one rejoiced exceedingly, and they set off back to the palace of the King of all the Birds, where Jack had left his horse; for now that he had the golden snuff-box safe he knew he could get the Castle back whenever he chose to send the three little red men to fetch it. But on the way over the sea, while Jack, who was dead tired with standing so long, lay down between the eagle’s wings and fell asleep, the mouse and the eagle fell to quarrelling as to

which of them had helped Jack the most, and they quarrelled so much that at last they laid the case before the frog. Then the frog, who made a very wise judge, said he must see the whole affair from the very beginning; so the mouse brought out the golden snuff-box from Jack's pocket, and began to relate where it had been found and all about it. Now, at that very moment Jack awoke, kicked out his leg, and plump went the golden snuff-box down to the very bottom of the sea!

"I thought my turn would come," said the frog, and went plump in after it.

Well, they waited, and waited, and waited for three whole days and three whole nights; but froggie never came up again, and they had just given him up in despair when his nose showed above the water.

"Have you got it?" they shouted.

"No!" says he, with a great gasp.

"Then what do you want?" they cried in a rage.

"My breath," says froggie, and with that he sinks down again.

Well, they waited two days and two nights more, and at last up comes the little frog with the golden snuff-box in its mouth.

Then they all rejoiced exceedingly, and the eagle flew ever so fast to the palace of the King of the Birds.

But alas and alack-a-day! Jack's troubles were not ended; his mother's malison was still bringing him ill-luck, for the King of the Birds flew into a fearsome rage because Jack had not brought the Castle of the golden pillars back with him. And he said that unless he saw it by eight o'clock next morning Jack's head should come off as a cheat and a liar.

Then Jack being close to death opened the golden snuff-box, and out tumbled the three little red men in their three little red caps. They had recovered their tempers and were quite glad to be back with a master who knew that they would only, as a rule, work under fear of death; for, see you, the servant-master had been for ever disturbing their sleep with opening the box to no purpose.

So before the clock struck eight next morning, there was the Castle on its twelve golden pillars, and the King of the Birds was fine and pleased, and let Jack take his horse and ride to the palace of the King of the Frogs. But there exactly the same thing happened, and poor Jack had to open the snuff-box again and order the Castle to come to the palace of the King

of the Frogs. At this the little red men were a wee bit cross; but they said they supposed it could not be helped; so, though they yawned, they brought the Castle all right, and Jack was allowed to take his horse and go to the palace of the King of all the Mice in the World. But here the same thing happened, and the little red men tumbled out of the golden snuff-box in a real rage, and said fellows might as well have no sleep at all! However, they did as they were bidden; they brought the Castle of the golden pillars from the palace of the King of the Frogs to the palace of the King of the Birds, and Jack was allowed to take his own horse and ride home.

But the year and a day which he had been allowed was almost gone, and even his gay young wife, after almost weeping her eyes out after her handsome young husband, had given up Jack for lost; so every one was astounded to see him, and not over-pleased either to see him come without his Castle. Indeed his father-in-law swore with many oaths that if it were not in its proper place by eight o'clock next morning Jack's life should be forfeit.

Now this, of course, was exactly what Jack had wanted and intended from the beginning; because when death was nigh he could open the golden snuff-box and order about the little red men. But he had opened it so often of late and they had become so cross that he was in a stew what to do; whether to give them time to show their temper, or to hustle them out of it. At last he decided to do half and half. So just as the hands of the clock were at five minutes to eight he opened the box, and stopped his ears!

Well! you never heard such a yawning, and scolding, and threatening, and blustering. What did he mean by it? Why should he take four bites at one cherry? If he was always in fear of death why didn't he die and have done with it?

In the midst of all this the tower clock began to whirr—

"Gentlemen!" says Jack—he was really quaking with fear—"do as you are told."

"For the last time," they shrieked. "We won't stay and serve a master who thinks he is going to die every day."

And with that they flew out of the window.

AND THEY NEVER CAME BACK.

The golden snuff-box remained empty for evermore.

But when Jack looked out of window there was the Castle in the middle of the lake on its twelve golden pillars, and there was his young wife ever so pretty and gay in her nightcap looking out of the window too.

So they lived happily ever after.

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