



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Lost Half Hour

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



nce upon a time there was an old widow woman who had three sons: the first two were clever enough, but the third, Bobo by name, was little better than a silly simpleton. All his mother's scoldings and beatings—and she smacked the poor lad soundly a dozen times a day—did him no good whatever.

Now it came to pass that one morning Princess Zenza, the ruler of the land, happened to pass by the cottage and heard Bobo being given a terrible tongue-lashing. Curious as to the cause of all the noise, the Princess drew rein, and summoned Bobo's mother to come near. On hearing her story, it occurred to the Princess that so silly a lad might amuse her; so she gave the mother a golden florin, and took poor silly Bobo with her to be her page.

You may be sure that it did not take the wise folk at the castle long to discover how great a simpleton had arrived. Courtiers, footmen, lackeys, turnspits even, were forever sending him off on ridiculous errands. Now he would be sent to find a white crow's feather or a spray of yellow bluebells; now he was ordered to look for a square wheel or a glass of dry water. Everybody laughed at him and made fun of him—that is, everybody except little Tilda, the kitchen-maid. When poor Bobo used to return from some wild-goose chase, tired out, mud-stained, and often enough wet to the skin, instead of laughing, little Tilda would find him a glass of warm milk, hang his coat by the fire to dry, and tell him not to be such a simpleton again. Thus, after a while, Bobo learned to ask Tilda's advice before going away on a wild-goose chase, and was in this way saved from many a jest.

Tilda, the kitchen-maid, was as sweet and pretty as she was kind and good. She was said to be the daughter of an old crane who had come to the castle one day, asking for help.

One pleasant mid-summer morning, when Bobo had been nearly a year at the castle, Princess Zenza overslept half an hour and did not come down to breakfast at the usual time. When she did get up, she found her court waiting for her in the castle gardens. As she came down the steps of the garden terrace, the Princess looked up at the castle clock to see how late she was, and said to her lady in waiting,—

“Dear me—why, I've lost half an hour this morning!”

At these words, Bobo, who was in attendance, pricked up his ears and said,—

“Please, Your Highness, perhaps I can find it.”

At this idea of finding a lost half-hour, the Princess laughed, and found herself echoed by the company.

“Shall we send Bobo in search of the lost half-hour?” said the Princess to the courtiers.

“Yes! Yes!” cried the courtiers. “Bobo shall look for the lost half-hour.”

“I'll give him a horse,” said one. “I'll give him my old hat,” said another. “He can have an old sword I broke last week,” said still another.

And so, in less time than it takes to tell about it, poor simpleton Bobo was made ready for his journey.

Before he left the castle, Bobo went down to the kitchen to say good-bye to Tilda.

“What, off again?” said the little kitchen-maid. “Where are you going now?”

“The Princess has lost a half-hour and I am going in search of it,” said Bobo, proudly. And he told how the Princess herself had commanded him to seek the half-hour through the world, and promised to bring Tilda a splendid present when he returned.

The good kitchen-maid said little, for she feared lest some misadventure overtake the poor simpleton; but when the chief cook was not looking, she tucked a fresh currant-bun into Bobo’s pocket, and wished him the best of good fortune.

So Bobo went to the castle gate, and mounted his horse, which stumbled and was blind in one eye.

“Good-bye, Bobo,” cried the assembled courtiers, who were almost beside themselves with laughter at the simpleton and his errand. “Don’t fail to bring back the lost half-hour!”

So Bobo rode over the hills and far away. Every now and then he would stop a passer-by and ask him if he had seen a lost half-hour.

The first person whom he thus questioned was an old man who was wandering down the high road that leads from the Kingdom of the East to the Kingdom of the West.

“A lost half-hour?” said the old man. “I’ve lost something much more serious, I’ve lost my reputation. You have n’t seen a lost reputation lying about here, have you? It was very dignified and wore tortoise-shell glasses.”

But Bobo had to answer “No,” and the old man wandered on again.

Another day the simpleton encountered a tall, dark, fierce kind of fellow, who answered his polite question with a scream of rage.

“A half-hour,” he roared. “No, I have n’t seen your half-hour; I would n’t tell you if I had; what’s more, I don’t want to see it. I’m looking for something I’ve lost myself. I’ve lost my temper. I lost it two years ago at home, and have n’t been able to find it anywhere since. Answer me, you silly, have you seen a lost temper anywhere? It’s about the size of a large melon and has sharp little points.”

On Bobo’s answering “No,” this dreadful person uttered so perfectly awful a screech of rage, that Bobo’s horse took fright and ran away with him, and it was all that Bobo could do to rein him in three miles farther down the road.

Still farther along, Bobo came to Zizz, the capital city of the Kingdom of the Seven Brooks, and was taken before the King himself.

“A lost half-hour?” said the King. “No, I am quite sure it has not been seen in my dominions. Would you mind asking, as you go through the world, for news of my little daughter?” (Here the poor old King took out a great green handkerchief and wiped his eyes.) “She was stolen by the fairies on midsummer eve fifteen years ago. Find her, worthy Bobo, and an immense reward will be yours.”

So Bobo left the proud city of Zizz, and once again rode over the hills and far away. But never a sign of the lost half-hour did he find, although he asked thousands of people. His faithful white horse died, and he continued his way on foot.

Three long years passed, and Bobo grew into a handsome lad, but remained a simpleton still. Finally, after he had wandered all about Fairyland, he came to the edge of the sea. Finding a ship moored in a little harbor, Bobo asked the sailors if they had seen a lost half-hour.

“No,” said the sailors, “but we are going to the Isles of Iron; suppose you go with us. The lost half-hour may be there.”

So Bobo went aboard the ship, and sailed out upon the dark sea.

For two days the weather was warm and clear, but on the third day, there came a dreadful storm, and on the third night the vessel was driven far off her course into the unknown ocean, and was wrecked upon a mysterious island of rocks that shone in the night like wet matches. A great wave swept the decks, and Bobo was borne away from his companions and carried toward the shining land. Though pounded and battered by the foaming waves, the simpleton at length managed to reach the beach, and took refuge in a crevice of the cliff during the stormy night.

When the dawn broke, all sign of the ship had disappeared. Looking about, Bobo found himself on a lovely island whose heart was a high mountain mass hidden in the fog still sweeping in from the sea. There was not a house, a road, or a path to be seen. Suddenly Bobo noticed a strange little door in the bark of a great lonely tree, and, opening this door, he discovered a little cupboard in which were a pair of wooden shoes. Above the shoes was a card, saying simply,—

PUT US ON.

So Bobo sat down on a stone by the foot of the tree, and put on the wooden shoes, which fitted him very nicely. Now these shoes were magic shoes, and Bobo had hardly stepped into them before they turned his feet inland. So Bobo obediently let the shoes guide him. At corners the shoes always turned in the right direction, and if Bobo forgot and blundered on the wrong way, the shoes swiftly began to pinch his toes.

For two days Bobo walked inland toward the great mountain. A warm wind blew the clouds and rain away, the sun shone sweet and clear. On the morning of the third day, the

simpleton entered a wood of tall silent trees, and as that day was drawing to a close, turrets of a magnificent castle rose far away over the leaves of the forest.

Bobo arrived at twilight.

He found himself in a beautiful garden, lying between the castle walls and the rising slopes of a great mountain. Strange to say, not a living creature was to be seen, and though there were lights in the castle, there was not even a warder at the gate. Suddenly a great booming bell struck seven o'clock; Bobo began to hear voices and sounds; and then, before the humming of the bell had died away, a youth mounted on a splendid black horse dashed at lightning speed out of the castle and disappeared in the wood. An old man with a white beard, accompanied by eleven young men, whom Bobo judged, from their expressions, to be brothers,—stood by the gate to see the horseman ride away.

Plucking up courage, Bobo came forward, fell on his knee before the old man, and told his story.

“Truly, you should thank the storm fairies,” said the old man; “for had you not been wrecked upon this island, never would you have discovered the lost half-hour. I am Father Time himself, and these are my twelve sons, the Hours. Every day, one after the other, they ride for an hour round the whole wide world. Seven O'clock has just ridden forth. Yes, you shall have the lost half-hour, but you must look after my sons' horses for the space of a whole year.”

To this Bobo willingly agreed. So Twelve O'Clock, who was the youngest of the Hours, took him to the stables and showed him the little room in the turret that he was to have. And thus for a year Bobo served Father Time and his sons. He took such good care of the great black horses of the Hours of the Night, and the white horses of the Hours of the Day, that they were never more proud and strong, nor their coats smoother and more gleaming.

When the year was up, Bobo again sought out Father Time.

“You have served faithfully and well,” said Father Time. “Here is your reward.” And, with these words, he placed in Bobo's hands a small square casket made of ebony. “The half-hour lies inside. Don't try to peek at it or open the box until the right time has come. If you do, the half-hour will flyaway and disappear forever.”

“Farewell, Bobo,” said kind young Twelve O'Clock, who had been the simpleton's good friend. “I, too, have a gift for thee. Drink this cup of water to the last drop.” And the youth handed the simpleton a silver cup full to the brim of clear shining water.

Now this water was the water of wisdom, and when Bobo had drunk it, he was no longer a simpleton. And being no longer a simpleton, he remembered the man who had lost his reputation, the man who had lost his temper, and the king whose daughter had been stolen by the fairies. So Bobo made so bold as to ask Father Time about them, for Father Time knows everything that has happened in the whole wide world.

“Tell the first,” said Father Time, “that his reputation has been broken into a thousand pieces which have been picked up by his neighbors and carried home. If he can persuade his neighbors to give them up, he should be able to piece together a pretty good reputation again. As for the man who lost his temper, tell him that it is to be found in the grass by the roadside close by the spot where you first met him. As for the missing daughter, she is the kitchen-maid in Princess Zenza’s palace, who is known as Tilda.”

So Bobo thanked Father Time, and at noon, Twelve O’Clock placed him behind him on the white charger, and hurried away. So fast they flew that Bobo, who was holding the ebony casket close against his heart, was in great danger of falling off. When they got to the seashore, the white horse hesitated not an instant, but set foot upon the water, which bore him up as if it had been, not water, but earth itself. Once arrived at the shore of Fairyland, Twelve O’Clock stopped, wished Bobo good-speed, and, rising in the air, disappeared into the glare of the sun. Bobo, with the precious ebony casket in his hand, continued on in the direction of Princess Zenza’s palace.

On the second morning of his journey, he happened to see far ahead of him on the highway the unfortunate aged man who had lost his reputation. To him, therefore, Bobo repeated the counsel of Father Time, and sent him hurrying home to his neighbors’ houses. Of the man who had lost his temper, Bobo found no sign. In the grass by the roadside, however, he did find the lost temper—a queer sort of affair like a melon of fiery red glass all stuck over with uneven spines and brittle thorns. Bobo, with great goodness of heart, took along this extraordinary object, in the hope of finding its angry possessor.

Farther on, the lad encountered Tilda’s father, the unhappy King, and delivered his message. The joy of the monarch knew no bounds, and Bobo, the one-time simpleton, became on the spot Lord Bobo of the Sapphire Hills, Marquis of the Mountains of the Moon, Prince of the Valley of Golden Apples, and Lord Seneschal of the proud City of Zizz—in a word, the greatest nobleman in all Fairyland. Then, having got together a magnificent cohort of dukes, earls, and counts, all in splendid silks, and soldiers in shining armor, the delighted King rode off to claim his missing daughter from Princess Zenza.

So on they rode, the harnesses jingling, the bridle-bells ringing, and the breastplates of the armed men shining in the sun. After a week of almost constant progress (for the King was so anxious to see his beloved daughter that he would hardly give the cavalcade time to rest), they came to the frontiers of Princess Zenza’s kingdom.

Strange to say, black mourning banners hung from the trees, and every door in the first village which the travelers saw was likewise hung with black streamers. On the steps of one of the cottages sat an old woman, all alone and weeping with all her might.

“What is the matter, my good woman?” said the King.

“O sir,” said the peasant woman, “evil days have fallen upon our unhappy kingdom. Three days ago a terrible dragon alighted in the gardens of the palace and sent word to Princess Zenza that if within three days she did not provide him with someone brave enough to go home with him and cook his meals and keep his cavern tidy, he would burn our fields with

his fiery breath. Yet who, I ask you, would be housekeeper for a dragon? Suppose he did n't like the puddings you made for him—why, he might eat you up! All would have been lost had not a brave little kitchen-maid named Tilda volunteered to go. It is for her that we are mourning. At two o'clock she is to be carried off by the dragon. It is almost two now. Alas! Alas!"

Hardly were the words out of her mouth, when the town bell struck twice, solemnly and sadly.

"Quick! quick!" cried the King and Bobo in the same breath, "Let us hurry to the castle. We may save her yet."

But they knew in their hearts that they were too late, and that poor Tilda had given herself to the dragon. And so it proved. In spite of his mad dash, Bobo, who had spurred on ahead, arrived exactly half an hour late. The monstrous dragon with Tilda in his claws was just a little smoky speck far down the southern sky. Princess Zenza and her court stood by wringing their jeweled hands.

Suddenly Bobo thought of the half-hour. He had arrived half an hour late, but he could have that half-hour back again! Things should be exactly as they were half an hour before.

He opened the cover of the ebony box. Something like a winged white flame escaped from it, and flew hissing through the air to the sun. As for the sun itself, turning round like a cartwheel and hissing like ten thousand rockets, it rolled back along the sky to the east. The hands of the clocks, which marked half-past two, whirred back to two o'clock in a twinkling. And, sure enough, there was brave little Tilda standing alone in a great field waiting for the dragon to come and take her away. Lumbering heavily along like a monstrous turtle, and snorting blue smoke, the dragon was advancing toward her.

Bobo ran down into the field and stood beside Tilda, ready to defend her to the end.

The dragon came nearer and nearer. Suddenly, angered by the sight of Bobo and his drawn sword, he roared angrily, but continued to approach. Bobo struck at him with his sword. The blade broke upon his steely scales. The dragon roared again. Now just as the dragon's mouth was its widest, Bobo who had been searching his pockets desperately, hurled into it the lost temper.

There was a perfectly terrific bang! as if a million balloons had blown up all at once. For the dragon had blown up. The lost temper had finished him. Only one fragment of him, a tiny bit of a claw, was ever found.

Everybody, you may be sure, began to cry "Hurrah" and "Hooray," and soon they were firing off cannon and ringing all the bells. Then Tilda's father took her in his arms, and told her that she was a real princess. The Grand Cross of the Order of the Black Cat was conferred upon Bobo by Princess Zenza, who also asked his pardon for having treated him so shabbily. This Bobo gave readily. A wonderful fete was held. When the rejoicings were over, Bobo and Tilda were married, and lived happily together all their days.

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