



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Master Mariner

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



nce upon a time a fine young fisherman rose early in the morning, and sailed alone to the fishing-grounds. There was very little wind, and beneath the speckled clouds and the cold, pearly light of the late dawn, the broad, low billows went slowly and unrippled to the land.

The fisherman cast anchor, and threw overboard his lines. Suddenly his boat moved uneasily, and close to its side the oily surface of the pale sea broke into a tumbling mass of foam. In the heart of the troubled waters, the fisherman beheld, to his great astonishment, a man clad in a strange garment of gleaming black scales, struggling with an enormous scarlet fish. A battle of life and death they fought, the man of the sea trying to stab the fish with a short dagger of shining steel, the fish trying, wolf-like, to tear at the body of its enemy. Now, with a swift lash of its bright scarlet body, the fish would rush at the man; now, with a long sure stroke of his powerful arms, the man would escape the attack. Suddenly, the fish hurled itself clear out of the water, and falling against the man, struck him a terrible blow with its tail. Then the ocean man, who was stunned for a moment, would have perished, had not the young fisherman swiftly seized his spear and plunged deep into the body of the fish. Mortally wounded, the scarlet creature sank through the sunless waters, the dark blood flowing from its side.

The man of the sea clutched the rail of the boat with his webbed hands, and said to the fisherman, "I am the King of the Caves of the Sea. I owe you my life, and you shall have a reward. Take this little silver fish. It will bring you good fortune; and should you ever be in deadly peril, you have but to cast it into the sea, and it will come and find me."

The fisherman thanked the King of the Caves, and took the silver fish. It was about the length of your little finger, and had pale moon-stones for eyes. The fisherman hung the talisman on a chain and wore it round his neck.

From that morning on, everything prospered with the youth. His boat never leaked, he was never caught in a storm, and the fish came to his lines and nets the instant he threw them overboard. Within a year or two he had grown so rich that he was able to buy the finest merchant ship in the world, and became a master mariner. Surely no more splendid fellow than this gallant, young captain was ever found on the Seven Seas. He sailed to cold and foggy Flannel Land, where the inhabitants all have incurable head colds, and have no other cloth but red flannel; he traded in the ports of gorgeous Velvet Land, whose inhabitants dress in velvet, and cover their walls with velvet hangings and their floors with velvet rugs.

One pleasant morning, running before a fine westerly breeze, he came to the Eastern Islands. Down the street of the bazaar walked the Master Mariner, followed by those who had articles to sell. Some showed him bright-colored birds which they had caught in the forests; others waved squares of figured cloth and called upon him to buy them; others still offered strange flasks and bottles of brass and gleaming copper. At the end of the street, the Master Mariner discovered a little quiet counter on which lay some dozens of puffy and distended brown-leather bags.

"What are these?" said the Master Mariner to a tall, lean man with beady, brown eyes who was in charge of the shop.

“These are breezes, Master Captain,” replied the shopman. “If you are going south, here is a bag of a very reliable northwest wind” (he picked up one of the brown bags); “if you are going east, here are some of the best-assorted westerly gusts. I am selling them at a very low price to-day, in fact at less than they cost me. What will you have?”

“I’ll have a smart easterly,” replied the Master Mariner.

He put down fifty gold pieces on the counter, took the bag which the shopman gave him, and walked away.

Now all these leather bags looked very much alike, and instead of selling the Master Mariner a brisk easterly breeze, the shopman had made an error, and sold him a frightful storm.

Again the Master Mariner went to sea; but luckily for him, he put the imprisoned storm away in a locker, intending to use it on some other voyage. Presently he came to Silk Land, loveliest of all the Cloth Islands. There the inhabitants dress only in the finest of silks; the roofs and walls are covered with layers of silk; the sun always shines, and pretty birds with silken plumage chatter in the fern-like trees.

Now the island of Silk Land was at this time ruled by the prettiest of princesses. She was about eighteen years old; she was tall for her age, and her eyes were quite the loveliest shade of brown. When the Master Mariner’s fine ship came into the harbor of Silk Land, cleaving the turquoise water, and with the bright sun shining on her silvery-white sails, the Princess happened to be resting under a silken awning on the roof of her palace. Catching sight of the ship, the Princess cried to her companions:—

“See what a fine ship is coming into port! She must be laden with many wonderful things. Send word to the Captain that I intend to visit her to-morrow morning.”

The next morning, sure enough, the Princess paid a visit to the ship, which lay at a wharf below the palace. In honor of the Princess’s coming, everything had been swept, scrubbed, and brightened, and gorgeous carpets from the Eastern Islands covered the decks. In shaded nooks, under costly tapestries, lay the treasures of the cargo—wonderful cloths and spices from the Eastern Islands, vessels of gold and silver from the Adamant Mountains, and jewels from the Desert of the Moon.

Now scarcely had the Master Mariner set eyes on the Princess, than he began to think her quite the most wonderful person he ever had beheld; as for the Princess, scarcely had the Master Mariner directed two or three respectful and somewhat tender glances in her direction, than she began to believe him quite the most gallant youth she had ever seen. She gave orders that several of the marvels be brought to her palace, and was looking about for something else, when her eyes chanced to fall upon the silver fish the Master Mariner was wearing.

“Pray, what is that little silver fish?” asked the Princess.

“A mere trifle which a friend once gave me,” replied the Master Mariner, reading in the Princess’s eyes and demeanor that she desired the talisman. “If Your Majesty will only deign to accept it, it is yours.”

And blinded by the Princess’s eyes, he gallantly, but somewhat incautiously, took the silver fish from its chain and gave it to the Princess, who laughed prettily, and accepted the gift.

Silver trumpets sounded, the servitors gathered up the treasures which the Princess had chosen, and the royal party returned to the palace with a good deal of chattering and laughter.

In a few days, the Master Mariner disposed of his cargo, and went again to sea. But wherever he went, the image of the beautiful Princess of Silk Land went with him.

Under the silken awning, on the wind-swept balcony, sat the Princess, and the image of the young Captain was often in her mind.

After three months had passed, the Princess took it into her head that it was time for the Master Mariner to return to Silk Land, and gave orders that a sharp watch be kept from the tower of the palace for his returning vessel. One morning, just as the Princess was having breakfast in her wonderful silken bed, news was brought to her that a large ship was headed for the harbor.

“Is it the Master Mariner’s ship?” asked the Princess.

“I do not know, Your Majesty,” replied the messenger. “The vessel is still many miles out to sea.”

So the Princess jumped out of bed, and without waiting for the ladies of the bedchamber to dress her, ran upstairs to her balcony. A great ship was coming in under a favoring breeze. Nearer and nearer it came, till the Princess could even distinguish the men aboard. Suddenly she uttered a little scream, and ran down stairs pell-mell. At the same moment the bells of Silk Land all began to ring wildly, and the beating of drums sounded through the town.

The approaching ship was a pirate ship! From the topmast flew the terrible black flag of the pirates of the Northern Isles!

Great confusion followed.

Warned by the uproar of the bells and drums, the people came scurrying through the streets to the palace; some carrying children in their arms; others the best beloved of their household furnishings. The palace was hastily made ready for a siege.

Soon, cursing and swearing, the black-bearded pirates arrived, and began to sack the town. Into every house they went, pulling out all the bureau drawers, reading private letters, upsetting the clocks, and leaving the water running in the kitchen sinks. They filled their pockets with cuff-links and watches.

Now, if the pirates had taken only the cufflinks, stick-pins, cameo brooches, silver candlesticks, souvenir spoons, and sugar-tongs, and then gone away, the raid would not have been too terrible; but the rogues, bribed by the horrid old King of the Oyster Mountains, a rejected suitor, were bent on getting possession of the Princess. On discovering that she had locked herself up in the strong palace, their rage knew no bounds. They made a dozen different attempts to break open the palace door, but all in vain. Finally, they decided to besiege the fortress.

For four days all went well enough with the Princess and her imprisoned people; but by the sixth day most of the food had been eaten; and by the end of the eighth day, the Princess knew she would have to surrender the following morning. With a sinking heart she went to a turret and looked out over the ocean in the hope of catching sight of a passing sail. But she saw only the deserted town and the pirate ship riding at anchor in the bay. An hour later she went to the turret again, and again she saw no sign of anything at sea. A terrible despair seized upon her, but nevertheless once more to the turret she climbed.

Far out at sea, headed toward land, was the brave ship of the Master Mariner!

So great was the joy of the poor Princess at the sight of the gallant vessel that she almost swooned; but recovering herself, like the Princess that she was, she ran down into the courtyard and told the news to her people. Immediately those who were weak or fretful from hunger began to take heart, and all who could crowded to the barred windows.

The Master Mariner's vessel came riding into the port; the watchers saw her drop anchor, saw the boats being lowered, and the sailors coming ashore. Soon the pirates and the sailors were at it hammer and tongs; a ceaseless clack clack of steel beating upon steel rose to the turrets of the palace; there were dreadful duels in the alleyways and battles in the public squares. Alas! just as the sailors were carrying the day, the Master Mariner received a blow on the head which knocked him insensible, and the mariners, disorganized by the loss of their chief, were soon surrounded and taken prisoners. Then, taking heart, the pirates rushed the palace, and burst open the doors.

When the rogues had taken everything on which they could lay their hands, they brought the prisoners and the plunder to the marketplace.

"Shall we bind all these people and take them aboard?" asked a pirate.

"No!" roared the one-eyed pirate chief. "Take only the Princess and that rogue of a Master Mariner."

The people now began to cry, "Oh, don't take the Princess, our dear Princess!" But all their prayers were useless.

Now, because the Master Mariner's ship was far more swift and beautiful than the pirate ship, the pirates, after setting fire to their own vessel, abandoned her, and put their plunder on board the Master Mariner's vessel. The following morning, leaving the people of Silk Land robbed and mourning, the pirates sailed away.

Within a few hours, all signs of land had disappeared. The sea was as black as ink. Against the horizon's edge, the great waves were leaping and breaking into foam.

"Bring me the list of booty!" cried the pirate captain, roaring the last word.

So the pirate treasurer came on deck, and read a long list beginning,—

"Fifty-three scarf-pins."

"Hooray!" shouted the pirate crew.

"A hundred and eighty-five sterling silver berry-spoons," next announced the treasurer.

"Hooray!" cried the crew again.

"One thousand clocks!" cried the treasurer.

"How many with alarms?" asked an old pirate anxiously.

There was a strained silence. The treasurer consulted his list.

"Seven hundred and forty-nine," he answered.

"Hooray!" yelled the pirate crew.

When the list had been read (it took very nearly half an hour to do it) the one-eyed captain cried, "Bring forth the Master Mariner!"

So the Master Mariner was brought forth, and thrown brutally against a mast. The pirate chief put his arms akimbo, cleared his throat savagely, and roared, "So you thought you were going to punish me, did you! Well, I'll show you what happens to people who upset my plans. Here, Hawk Eye, and you, Toby, throw this fellow overboard."

Hearing this awful order, the Princess screamed and would have run to the Master Mariner, had not rude hands restrained her.

Splash! the Mariner fell into the inky sea. Swift as a bird, his own ship went by him; he saw the mocking face of the pirate chief leering at him from over the rail; in a few minutes he was alone, all, all alone in the wide, wide sea. For some time he swam about, and by great good luck discovered a log of wood strong enough to bear his weight, floating near at hand. Upon this he climbed, and there we shall leave him for the present.

When the Captain had disappeared from sight miles behind, the pirate chief walked over to the Princess, and looking at her, said sneeringly, "Well, my beauty, are you going to make up your mind to be the wife of the King of the Oyster Mountains? I'm taking you to him, and mind now, no fooling!"

The Princess shrank from him with horror, and as she fell back, the sun gleamed on the silver fish she was wearing at her throat. The chief made a rude snatch at it; the Princess, however, was quicker than he, and hit him a good box on the ear.

“Ow!” cried the chief, dancing up and down with rage. “I’ll fix you, you ill-tempered minx. Here, somebody, tie this girl to the mast for the rest of the day, and give her nothing but bread and water.”

In obedience to his order, the Princess, with her arms tied by the wrists behind her back, was lashed to the mast. When she had been securely bound, the chief, whose ear was still tingling, took the silver fish. He was looking at it when he saw something which made him drop the fish on the deck.

Out of the forecastle door thick clouds of black mist were rolling, exactly as if the hold of the ship were on fire. For a meddlesome pirate had found the leather bag of storm-wind and had opened it, mistaking it for a bag of wine.

The strange clouds, swirling round the deck, grew instant by instant darker and denser. Soon the tops of the masts could no longer be distinguished. The sun took on a horrible copper hue, and the sea became a mottled black and green. A howling wind arose.

A moment later, with the violence of an explosion, the storm burst. Mountain-high rose the glassy white-capped waves. The lightning fell in violet cataracts, and thunder roared and tumbled through the caverns of the sky. An ocean of hissing rain fell into the waters.

Suddenly the pirate chief, as he staggered down the stairs, shouted, “We are lost!”

Just astern, an enormous, glassy wave, higher than the masts of the ship, was about to break. The pirates yelled, but little good their yelling did them. An instant later the wave broke upon the deck, and crashing tons of green water swept every single pirate into the sea. Slowly, and with the tense struggle of a wounded animal, the good ship lifted itself from the waves.

The Princess was the only human being left on board. Only the cords which bound her to the mast had saved her from being swept away.

Now, when the water swept the deck, the silver fish which lay at the Princess’s feet became alive and darted over the rail into the sea.

The storm continued. The helpless Princess expected every minute to sink with the ship into the roaring waters. Suddenly, to her horror, a high rocky island appeared a few miles ahead. Toward this island, over whose cruel reefs the ocean was foaming and breaking, the ship was drifting fast. Tied to the mast, the Princess listened to the terrible cry of the breakers, and, spell-bound, watched the jagged rocks of the island ever drawing nearer.

Now while the Princess was in this terrible situation, the Master Mariner, who had been blown before the storm like a feather, also came in sight of the rocky island. The instant he

caught sight of the shore, and heard the roaring of the breakers, he knew that he could not hope to reach the land. He was on the edge of the reefs when the King of the Caves of the Sea, who had been summoned by the silver fish, rose out of the water beside him, and taking him in his webbed hands, swam with him to a place of safety. Just as they reached the shallows, the mists of the tempest parted, and driving through the darkness and the storm, headed for the reefs, came the Master Mariner's ship with the Princess tied to the mast.

“Oh, save her! Save the Princess!” cried the Master Mariner.

The King of the Caves of the Sea stretched out his hands over the island and uttered a strange and mysterious word. So awful was its power that the rocky cliffs split open, forming a safe and sheltered harbor. Into this port came the ship, safe at last as a bird in its nest.

So the Master Mariner, the Princess, and the ship were all wonderfully preserved, and when the storm was over, the King of the Caves saw them home to Silk Land. There the Master Mariner found his crew waiting for him, and in a few days they had rigged new sails for the ship which were even whiter than the old. The inhabitants got back the fifty-three scarf pins, the hundred and eighty-five sterling silver berry-spoons, the thousand clocks, and the rest of the booty which the pirates had stowed away in the Master Mariner's ship.

Great was the rejoicing.

Greater still was the joy, however, when the Master Mariner married the Princess.

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