



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Queen of Lantern Land

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



nce upon a time the youngest son of a king became filled with the desire to go abroad and see the world. He got his father's permission to depart, kissed his parents good-bye, mounted his black horse, and galloped away down the high road. Soon the gray towers of the old castle in which he was born hid themselves behind him.

The Prince journeyed on, spending the days in traveling, and the nights in little wayside inns, till one day he found himself in the heart of the Adamant Mountains. The great, red granite crags of the surrounding peaks rose out of the gleaming snow like ugly fingers, and the slopes of giant glaciers sparkled in the sun like torrents of diamonds. The Prince sat down by some stunted trees whose tops had long before been broken off by an avalanche, and began to eat the bit of bread and cheese which he had stored in his pocket. His black horse, meanwhile, ate the grass which grew here and there along the mountain path. And as the Prince sat there in the bright sun and the silence of the mountains, he became aware of a low, continuous roaring.

“There must be a waterfall near-by,” said the Prince to himself. “I’ll go and see it.”

So, casting another look at his steed, who was contentedly browsing, the Prince climbed up the mountainside in the direction of the sound.

The Prince climbed and climbed, he went in this direction and in that, yet the sound never grew any louder or fainter. Suddenly he realized that he was hopelessly lost. The little path up which he had ridden had vanished completely, and he had not the slightest idea in which direction it lay. He called aloud, but only the mountain echoes answered mockingly.

Night came, and the Prince took shelter behind a great rock. All the next day he labored to find the path, but in vain. He grew very hungry and cold. Every once in a while he would hear the roaring of the waterfall, which seemed to have grown louder.

Another day dawned, and another day again. The Prince was getting very weak. He knew that he was approaching the mysterious cataract, for the noise of the water was now tremendous, and heaven and earth were full of its roar. The third night came, and the full moon rose solemnly over the snow-clad summits of the lonely and mysterious mountains. Suddenly the Prince, walking blindly on, staggered through a narrow passage-way between two splintered crags, and found himself face to face with the mystery.

He stood on the snowy floor of a vast amphitheatre whose walls were the steep sides of the giant mountains. Farthest away from him, and opposite the moon, the wall of the bowl appeared as a giant black precipice, whose top seemed to reach almost to the moon-dimmed stars; and over this precipice a broad river was endlessly pouring, shining in the night like the overflow of an ocean of molten silver. Though now very weak from lack of food, and dizzy with the roaring of the cataract, the Prince made his way to the shore of the foaming and eddying lake into which the water was falling. Great was his surprise to discover that the overflow of this lake disappeared into the earth through a long, low opening in the cliff behind the fall. Greater still was his surprise to see a strange many-colored light burning within the cave.

The Prince made his way toward the light, along a narrow beach of white sand lying between the wall of the cavern and the racing waters of the mysterious river, and found that the glow came from a magnificent lantern studded with emeralds, topazes, amethysts, and rubies, which hung by a chain from the roof of the grotto. Directly under this lantern, drawn up on the sand, lay a little boat with a lantern fastened to the bow. The Prince pushed the boat into the river, and got into it, and the swift current seized him and hurried him away.

At first the cavern grew higher and wider; then it shrank again, and the boat, borne along with incredible speed, shot down a rocky passageway into the very heart of the earth. The passageway broadened once more, and the boat rode gently through monstrous caves whose roofs were upheld by twisted columns taller than the tallest tree. There were times when all was so still that the Prince could easily have imagined himself back in the solitude of the mountains; there were times when the foaming and roaring of the underground river grew so deafening that the Prince feared lest he might be approaching the brink of a subterranean cataract.

Many hours passed. The Prince did not know whether it was night or day. At length, while the boat was gliding through a vast hall, he fell asleep. When he awoke, he found that the boat was floating on the black, glassy surface of an immense underground ocean. All signs of the cavern had disappeared. Far away, over the edge of this ocean, a strange, beautiful glow mounted into the starless sky of the underworld. And while the Prince was gazing at the glow, the boat swung into a new current, and was borne swiftly toward the light. In a short time the light grew so wide and bright that one would have believed that a strange, golden sun had risen. The boat passed between two giant marble pillars supporting enormous crystal globes filled with a golden fire, and the Prince found himself in the harbor of Lantern Land.

A city lay before him, a strange golden city edging the shore of a vast, semi-circular bay. Because in the centre of the earth there is neither sun nor moon, the people have to be continually burning lights; and so many and so great were the lanterns of Lantern Land that the town was as bright as day. The edge of the harbor was marked with a row of golden lanterns; there were immense lanterns at every six paces along the streets; a lantern hung from every house; and the church-towers, instead of having bells in them, had great golden lamps which illumined everything for some distance about. Moreover, every inhabitant of Lantern Land carried a lantern with him wherever he went, the rich carrying golden lanterns set with transparent precious stones, the poor carrying lights of ordinary glass.

Soon the Prince saw a magnificent ship coming out to meet him. The prow was carved in the shape of a dragon's head, and a beautiful lantern hung from its jaws. Overcome by hunger and fatigue, the poor Prince fell insensible to the floor of his little boat. When he came to his senses again, he was lying between sheets of the whitest, most delicate linen in a great four-poster bed, in a room in the royal palace.

Thanks to his kind hosts, the Prince soon recovered his strength. When he was completely himself again, he was summoned to an audience with the Queen of Lantern Land.

The Queen, a very beautiful young woman, wearing a wonderful lantern crown, sat on an ebony throne. On each side of the throne stood a tall soldier, clad in scarlet and holding a long ebony staff surmounted by a round lantern lit by a golden flame.

The Prince dropped on his knee, and thanked the Queen for her kindness and hospitality.

“You are the first stranger to come to Lantern Land for a thousand years,” said the young Queen. “If it is not asking too much from a guest, pray how did you happen to find the river of the underworld?”

So the Prince told her that he was a king’s son, and described his adventures in the mountains. You may be sure the Queen was glad to hear of his royal birth, for she had fallen in love with him at first sight.

A month passed. The Prince remained a guest in the palace. All kinds of festivities were given in his honor; there were wonderful dances, masquerades, picnics, and theatricals going on all the time. One day the Prince and the Queen, accompanied by a little group of courtiers, rode to the frontier of Lantern Land. The lovers galloped ahead of the party and reached a little hill beyond which there were no more lanterns. Ahead of them the rolling land, sweeping farther and farther away from the light, grew darker and darker, till it finally plunged into the eternal night of the underworld.

The Prince looked at the Queen, and saw that she was weeping.

“Dear love, why do you weep?” asked the Prince, who felt sad to see tears in his lady’s lovely eyes.

“I weep to think that in spite of our love we must soon part forever,” said the Queen.

“Part forever? Dear lady, what can you mean?” said the anxious Prince.

“A cruel fate hangs over us,” replied the lady. “Know, dear Prince, that I am promised in marriage to the Enchanter Dragondel, and that in exactly eight days, he will come here to claim my hand.”

“The Enchanter Dragondel—who is he?” said the Prince.

“Alas,” said the Queen, “the Enchanter Dragondel is the most powerful magician of all the underworld. He is about eight feet tall, has cruel sunken eyes that burn like dull fires, and dresses entirely in black. We met at a ball given by the King of the Goblins. Dragondel pursued me with compliments. A few days afterwards, an iron boat arrived in the port of Lantern Land, having on board a giant blue dog who is Dragondel’s younger brother. This terrible animal, from whose sight the people of Lantern Land fled screaming, made his way to the palace, and dropped at my feet a jeweled casket, which he carried between his jaws. The casket contained Dragondel’s request for my hand, and added that, were I to refuse him, he would let loose a legion of ghosts and other winged spirits against the lanterns of Lantern Land. I had a vision of Lantern Land in darkness; of my poor subjects dying of fear and

starvation. Rather than let this vision come true, I accepted the Enchanter. Soon I shall never see you again, for Dragondel will come and take me to his awful castle which lies on an island in the dark ocean. Nor will you ever be able to save me, for Dragondel has so bewitched the waves that a terrible whirlpool forms on the sea when a boat approaches the enchanted castle, and engulfs it.”

“But I can fight Dragondel,” said the Prince, like the brave youth that he was.

“That would be of little use,” replied the Queen, “for you would be changed into a stone the instant you crossed swords with him. Tomorrow, the blue dog arrives to remind me of my obligation, and to carry back to the island some of the palace servants who are to make Dragondel’s castle ready for my coming.”

The other members of the party now rode up, and the Queen dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief, and pretended not to have been crying. The Prince and the Queen felt very unhappy as they rode home.

On the next day, sure enough, the iron boat arrived, and the blue dog, who was as large as a lion, went to the Queen’s palace, and bade her make ready for the coming wedding. A dozen of the Queen’s servants were then ordered to go with the blue dog to Dragondel’s castle. Among these servants, disguised as a kitchen lad, was the Prince; for he had determined to see if there was not some way in which the young Queen could be rescued from the wicked magician.

The boat neared the island, but no terrible whirlpool formed in the enchanted sea. At last the boat reached Dragondel’s castle. It stood on the top of a high lonely rock against whose steep sides the waves of the underground ocean were forever foaming and breaking, and it was half in ruins and was very poorly lighted.

The Prince took his place in the kitchen, and sought for an opportunity to prevent the marriage of Dragondel and the Queen.

For four days of the precious week, however, the poor Prince was kept so busy baking and making pastries for the coming of the bride that he did not have an instant to ask questions or do anything else.

In the morning hours of the fifth day there was a terrible moaning and roaring outside, and the cooks rushed to the kitchen windows. An unhappy fishing boat had been swept by the wind too near Dragondel’s castle, the enchanted whirlpool had formed, and caught the boat in its awful circle. Now it went slowly round the outer edge, now, going faster and faster, it slid down the side of the awful funnel, and finally it vanished. An instant later, the whirlpool had disappeared, leaving the sea roaring and foaming.

The Prince shuddered.

“Well you may shudder,” said the chief cook, “for such would have been your fate if our master’s brother had not carried with him the talisman which rules the whirlpool.”

“Talisman? What talisman?” said the Prince affecting stupidity.

“Why the little golden hand, you fool,” said the chief cook.

“My! it must be a great big hand to be able to quiet that whirlpool,” said the Prince.

“Big indeed, you ninny!” growled the cook. “Why, the magic hand is only as big as a baby’s hand. I’ve seen it many times. The master carries it in his pocket, and puts it under his pillow while he sleeps.”

So, later on, when his work was done, and everybody had gone to bed, the Prince, in the hope of stealing the talisman, tried to make his way to Dragondel’s bedchamber. But when he reached the foot of the stairs which led to the Enchanter’s room, he found it guarded by two black panthers which stared at him with insolent yellow eyes and switched their long tails. The Prince went outdoors, to see if there was any hope of climbing to the room along the outer wall, and found that the windows of Dragondel’s chamber overlooked a cliff falling thousands of feet sheer to the dark sea. Far, far away, the Prince saw the glow of Lantern Land. Only a short time remained to him in which to save his beloved lady of the lanterns.

As he wandered about, very sick at heart, he saw a little black cat running madly back and forth along the edge of a steep cliff from one of whose crevices came a persistent, unhappy mewling. The poor cat was a mother-cat, and was trying to rescue a kitten of hers that had fallen down between the rocks. At great risk of being dashed to pieces himself, the brave Prince climbed down the precipice, rescued the kitten, and gave it back to its anxious mother.

“Thank you, brave youth,” said the old cat.

“May it some day be within my power to help you as you have helped me.”

“You can help me this very moment,” said the Prince. And he told the cat who he was, why he had come to the castle, and of his desire to get possession of the talisman.

“I will help you get the talisman,” said the cat. “The panthers will let me pass, for they are cousins of mine. But you must make another little golden hand to take the place of the one I shall steal; for if Dragondel misses the golden hand, he will summon his demons to find it, and we shall both lose our lives. Go now to the kitchen, carve a small hand with the fingers close together and the thumb lying close to the fingers, gild it over with the gold dust you have had given you for the pastry icings, and bring it to me tomorrow night at this very hour.”

So the Prince worked the rest of the night carving and gilding the little golden hand, and on the next night he gave it to the cat. The cat took it in her mouth as she would have a mouse, walked coolly by the panthers, and entered Dragondel’s room. She had just succeeded in getting the true hand out from under the magician’s pillow when Dragondel woke up. The cat was clever enough to pretend to be engaged in a mouse-hunt, so the Enchanter paid no attention to her and fell asleep once more. When the cat, however, got under Dragondel’s

couch again, the two hands lay side by side and she could not remember just which one was the talisman and which one the false hand. So because she had to act quickly, she put one of the hands under the pillow, brought the other to the Prince and told him her story. But so well matched were the little hands, that even the Prince was far from certain that he had not got his own hand back again.

And now came the seventh day, the day on which Dragondel, the blue dog, and all the wicked Enchanter's friends were to sail to Lantern Land for the marriage ceremony. The iron ship, made gay with a thousand small scarlet lanterns, stood ready to carry them over. The Enchanter and his company got in, and the vessel left the island.

The Prince stood watching the ship from the top of the cliffs. What anxiety was in his heart! If Dragondel still possessed the true talisman, he would cross the whirlpool safely, and marry the beautiful Queen of Lantern Land.

The vessel sped on. It was now at some distance from the island.

"All is lost," thought the Prince with a sinking heart; "Dragondel has the true talisman." And in his bitterness he was about to throw the little golden hand which lay in his pocket down into the sea.

Suddenly the air became filled with a terrible moaning; the sea became troubled; the whirlpool awoke. And the Prince saw the red lights of the Enchanter's ship whirled round and round, faster and faster, till they disappeared forever in the waters of the sunless sea.

As for the Prince, he soon found another boat, and taking with him the talisman, his fellow servants, and the black cat and her kittens, he returned to Lantern Land, married the Queen, and lived happily ever after.

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