



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

The Seller of Dreams

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



Once upon a time a mother called her only son into the kitchen, gave him a basket of fine, fresh eggs, and bade him carry them to his Aunt Jane, who lived a few miles down the valley. The son, a lively lad about twelve years of age, obeyed his mother with joy, and clapping his little green hat on his head, stepped forth into the road. It was a beautiful clear morning in the spring, and the earth, released from the icy chains of winter, was rejoicing in her freedom and the return of the sun. A few birds, just back from the southland, rocked on twigs swollen with bursting buds, a thousand rills flowing from everywhere and in every direction sparkled and sang, and the air was sweet with the odor of ploughed fields.

The boy, whose name was Peter, walked along whistling. Suddenly he saw a spot on the road shining as dazzlingly as if a bit of the sun itself had fallen to the earth. "A bit of glass," thought Peter. But it was not a bit of glass after all, but a fine golden florin which must have dropped from somebody's purse.

Peter stooped, picked up the gold piece, put it in his pocket, and walked off whistling louder than ever. In a little while he came to a place where the road wound down a little hill, and Peter saw, trudging up this hill, a very strange looking old man. He was a very old man; his face was puckered up into a thousand wrinkles like the skin of a shrunken apple, and he had long, snow-white hair and a white beard which reached almost to his waist. Moreover, he was strangely dressed in a robe of cherry scarlet, and wore golden shoes. From a kind of belt hung two horns on silver chains, one an ordinary cow's horn, the other a beautiful horn carved of the whitest ivory, and decorated with little figures of men and animals.

"Dreams to sell! Dreams to sell!" called out the old man as soon as he caught sight of Peter. "Don't you want to buy a dream, young man?"

"What kind of dreams have you?" asked Peter.

"Good, bad, true, false—all kinds," replied the seller of dreams. "I have even a few thrilling nightmares. Dreams to sell! Dreams to sell!"

"How much does a dream cost?" asked Peter.

"A golden florin," answered the merchant.

"I'll have one, please," said Peter; and he handed over the florin he had found.

The old man took a kind of wonderful sugarplum out of the ivory horn, and gave it to Peter to eat.

"You will have the dream next time you sleep," said he, and trudged on.

So Peter continued his journey, stopping every once in a while to look back at the strange old man, who was slowly climbing the hill. At length Peter came to a little quiet grove of pines, and there he sat down on a big stone and ate the luncheon which his mother had prepared for him. The sun was high in the heavens; it was close on to high noon. Now, as

Peter was contentedly munching his bread and cheese, he heard, at first far away, then quite near at hand, the clear notes of a coachman's horn. The notes of the second call died away in a great pattering of hoofs and tinkling of little bells, and suddenly, arriving in a great swirl of yellow dust, came a magnificent coach drawn by twelve white horses. A lady, very richly dressed and wearing many sparkling diamonds, sat within the coach. To Peter's astonishment, the lady was his Aunt Jane.

The coach stopped with a great jingling of the twelve harnesses, and Aunt Jane leaned out of the window, and said to Peter, "What are you doing here, child?"

"I was on my way to your cottage with a basket of fine fresh eggs," answered Peter.

"Well, it's fortunate I found you," said Aunt Jane, "for I have given up living in the cottage, and have now got a castle of my own. Jump in, Peter, and don't forget your basket."

So Peter climbed into the coach, closed the door behind him, and was driven away. The coach went over hill and down dale; it went through strange forests from whose branches green parrots whooped and shrieked; it rolled through valleys in strange shining mountains. Peter stole a look at Aunt Jane and saw that she was wearing a crown.

"Are you a queen, Aunt Jane?" he asked.

"Indeed, I am," replied his aunt. "You see, Peter, two days ago, while I was looking for my white cow who had strayed away, I came upon the magnificent castle to which we are now going. It has four beautiful towers, and a door set with diamonds.

"Whose castle is this?" I said to the lodge-keeper.

"It's nobody's, marm," said he.

"What," said I; "do you mean to say that nobody owns this fine castle?"

"That's just what I mean to say, marm," answered he; "the castle belongs to anyone who wants it."

"So into the castle I walked, and I did n't go out, you may be sure, till I had been into every room that I could find. Then I put on these clothes and these diamonds, which I found in a cupboard, and went down and told the servants I intended to be queen. You see, Peter dear, there's nothing that a woman of determination and energy can't accomplish."

The coach rolled on, and soon Peter caught sight of Aunt Jane's castle. It was rather large, and had an enormous round tower at each corner—a thing which brought to Peter's mind the picture of an elephant lying on its back. Peter and Aunt Jane, accompanied by a train of servants dressed in blue-and-buff livery, walked into the castle through the diamond-studded door.

“Do you think you could eat a little more of something?” said Aunt Jane, taking off her white-kid gloves; “because if you can I’ll have a place set for you at the luncheon table.”

And Peter, who like all boys, could eat a little more anywhere and at any time, readily answered, “Yes.”

So Peter and Aunt Jane sat down to a wonderful little table covered with a snow-white cloth.

“Draw your chair nearer, Peter dear,” said Aunt Jane.

“I can’t” said Peter, “it’s stuck to the floor.”

And so it was; the chair was stuck to the floor, and no amount of pushing or pulling could budge it.

“That’s odd,” said Aunt Jane; “but never mind, I’ll push the table over to the chair.”

But like the chair, the table refused to budge. Peter then tried to slide his plate of soup closer to him, but the plate, which the servant had placed on the cloth but an instant before, had evidently frozen to the table in some extraordinary manner and could not be moved an inch. The soup in the plate, however, was not fastened to the dish, nor were the wonderful strawberry-cakes and the delicious ices with which the dinner closed.

“You don’t suppose this castle is enchanted, do you, Aunt Jane?” asked Peter.

“Not a bit of it,” replied Aunt Jane. “And even if it were,” she continued recklessly, “I should n’t mind, for there’s nothing that a woman of determination and energy can’t accomplish.” There was a pause, and then Aunt Jane added, “I am going to have some guests to dinner this evening, so run round and amuse yourself as well as you can. There’s ever so much to see in the castle, and in the garden there’s a pond with swans in it.”

Attended by her servants, Aunt Jane majestically walked away. Peter spent the afternoon exploring the castle. He went through room after room; he scurried through the attics like a mouse, and was even lost for a while in the cellars. And everywhere he went, he found everything immovable. The beds, tables, and chairs could neither be moved about nor lifted up, and even the clocks and vases were mysteriously fastened to their places on the shelves.

The night came on. Coach after coach rolled up to the diamond door, which sparkled in the moonlight. When the guests had all arrived, a silver trumpet sounded, and Aunt Jane, dressed in a wonderful gown of flowering brocade edged with pearls, came solemnly down the great stairway of the castle hall. Two little black boys, dressed in oriental costume and wearing turbans, held up her gorgeous train, and she looked very grand indeed. Peter, to his great surprise, found himself dressed in a wonderful suit of plum-colored velvet.

“Welcome, my friends,” said Queen Jane, who had opened a wonderful ostrich-feather fan. “Are we not fortunate in having so beautiful a night for our dinner?”

And the Queen, giving her arm to a splendid personage in the uniform of an officer of the King's dragoons, led the way to the banquet-hall.

The wonderful party, all silks and satins, and gleaming with jewels, swept like a peacock's tail behind her. Soon dinner was over, and the guests began to stray by twos and threes to the ballroom. Aunt Jane and the soldier led off the grand march; then came wonderful, stately minuets, quadrilles, and sweet old-fashioned waltzes. The merriment was at its height when somebody ran heavily up the great stairs leading to the ballroom, and the guests, turning round to see whence came the clatter, saw standing in the doorway a strange old man dressed in a robe of cherry scarlet and wearing golden shoes. It was the seller of dreams. His white hair was disheveled, his robe was awry, and there was dust on his golden shoes.

"Foolish people!" screamed the old seller of dreams, his voice rising to a shriek, "Run your lives! This castle lies under a terrible enchantment; in a few minutes it will turn upside-down. Have you not seen that everything is fastened to the floor? Run for your lives!"

Immediately there was a great babble of voices, some shrieks, and more confusion, and the guests ran pell-mell down the great stairs and out the castle door. To Peter's dismay, Aunt Jane was not among them. So into the castle he rushed again, calling at the top of his voice, "Aunt Jane! Aunt Jane!" He ran through the brilliantly lit and deserted ballroom; he saw himself running in the great mirrors of the gallery. "Aunt Jane!" he cried; but no Aunt Jane replied.

Peter rushed up the stairs leading to the castle tower, and emerged upon the balcony. He saw the black shadow of the castle thrown upon the grass far below by the full moon; he saw the great forest, so bright above and so dark and mysterious below, and the long snow-clad range of the Adamant Mountains. Suddenly a voice, louder than the voice of any human being, a voice deep, ringing, and solemn as the sound of a great bell, cried,—

"'T is time!"

Immediately everything became as black as ink, people shrieked, the enchanted castle rolled like a ship at sea, and leaning far to one side, began to turn upside-down. Peter felt the floor of the balcony tip beneath him; he tried to catch hold of something, but could find nothing; suddenly, with a scream, he fell. He was falling, falling, falling, falling, falling.

When Peter came to himself, instead of its being night, it was still noonday, and he was sitting on the same stone in the same quiet roadside grove from which he had caught sight of his Aunt Jane in her wonderful coach. A blue jay screamed at him from overhead. For Aunt Jane, the coach, and the enchanted castle had been only a dream. Peter, you see, had fallen asleep under the pines, and while he slept, he had dreamed the dream he purchased from the seller of dreams.

Very glad to be still alive, Peter rubbed his eyes, took up his basket of eggs, and went down the road whistling.

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