



Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

Prince Sneeze

From "The Firelight Fairy Book" by Henry Beston



nce upon a time a king and a queen gave a magnificent party in honor of the christening of their new-born son, Prince Rolandor. To this party the royal parents took good care to invite every single fairy in Fairyland, for they knew very well the unhappy consequences of forgetting to invite fairies to christenings. When all the invitations had been sent out, the Queen went down to the kitchen to superintend the cooking of the master-dainty of the feast, a huge strawberry-tart.

The morning on which the grand ceremony was to take place arrived. At half-past ten the Court Astrologer, who was master of ceremonies, gave the order to form in line; and at ten minutes to eleven the splendid procession started for the church. The road was lined with the King's vassals shouting, "Hurrah, hurrah!" Countless little elves with gauzy wings watched from the branches of the trees; and the great cathedral bells went clang, bang, clang, as merrily as could be.

Just behind the royal body-guard came the King's gold-and-diamond coach shining in the sunlight of June, with the King and the Queen in it on one side and the Court Astrologer and the fairy Titania, prospective godparents of the little Prince, on the other. The Prince himself, swathed in a wonderful silk mantle edged with pearls and turquoises, slept in the Astrologer's arms.

The procession entered the church, where the venerable Lord Archbishop, surrounded by a magnificent choir, was awaiting its coming. A hush went over the great assembly as the parents and the godparents advanced to the flower-decked font, and the silence lasted until His Eminence had sprinkled the Prince and given him the name of Rolandor. Then the bells rang again, the organ roared so that the windows shook in their casements, and the choristers sang like birds on a summer afternoon.

The christening over, the procession went back to the castle, past the waiting rows of bystanders, not one of whom had changed his place or gone away, so superb had been the spectacle.

The christening banquet was laid in the great hall of the castle, and, thanks to the Court Astrologer, things went off beautifully. It was the only large banquet ever known in the history of the world where courses were served all at one time, and while one person was finishing an ice, another was not beginning with the soup. Nor was the menu mixed, which happens so frequently to-day that you are apt to have soup, ice, cake, roast, soup, and a roast again. No, from soup to ice the banquet was a huge success; but, alas, disaster came with the strawberry-tart.

As the Queen was chatting with the Lord Chancellor of the Enchanted Islands, she happened to notice—for like a good hostess she had been keeping an eye to the comfort of her guests—that nobody on the right-hand side of the hall had been served with strawberry-tart. Almost at the same moment, the chief cook, looking rather pale and worried, bustled through the throng and whispered in her ear, "Your Majesty, the strawberry-tart has given out!"

The Queen turned pale. At length she managed to ask in a weak voice, “Have you plenty of other pastries?”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” replied the cook.

“Then let them be served at once.”

The cook withdrew, and the Queen, though somewhat shaken, took up the conversation again. Ten minutes passed, and she was beginning to forget her start, when a voice, rising clear and rasping over the hubbub of the hall, said suddenly, “Where’s my piece of strawberry-tart?”

Everybody turned toward the speaker, an elderly fairy from the Kingdom of the Black Mountains, named Malvolia. She stood up in her place, her arms akimbo, glowering at her plate, on which an attendant had just deposited a small chocolate éclair.

“Where’s my piece of strawberry-tart?” she repeated.

The Queen rose. “I am very sorry, Madam Malvolia,” said she in her sweetest voice, “but the strawberry-tart has given out.”

“Hoity-toity,” answered Malvolia rudely; “you mean that you only baked enough for your own personal friends.”

At this several guests cried, “Sh! Sh!” and the King began to look worried.

“We will send for some at once,” announced His Majesty.

“Oh yes,—strawberry-tart baked by the Queen’s own hands for her own dear friends,” said Malvolia sneeringly; “but for me, a fairy of age and distinction, an ordinary, low baker’s éclair. The Kingdom of the Black Mountains has been deliberately insulted in my person!”

“No, no, no, no!” cried the King and the Queen. “We assure you, madam, that it was a simple mischance.”

“Pish and tush!” replied Malvolia, who, like a great many people, secretly enjoyed feeling herself aggrieved. “I consider the affair an affront, a deliberate affront. And you shall pay dear for this humiliation,” she screamed, quickly losing control of her temper. “Every time the Prince sneezes something shall change until—”

At this very moment, alas, a northeast wind blew gustily through the open windows of the hall, shaking the tapestries from the walls, and carrying away the last of Malvolia’s sentence. The angry fairy turned herself into a great black raven and flew, cawing hoarsely, over the heads of the banqueters and out of the window with the wind.

A baby’s cry was heard, and the King and the Queen rushed panic-stricken to where their little son lay in his cradle on a raised platform at the head of the hall. The little Prince’s fat,

pink face was twisted into dreadful lines; he opened his mouth wide several times and half closed it again; then, opening it wider than ever, he sneezed a terrible sneeze.

There came a loud clap of thunder. When the confusion was over, the Court Astrologer was found to have turned into an eight-day clock, with a sun, moon, and stars arrangement, a planetary indicator, and a calendar calculated for two thousand years. The banquet ended rather gloomily, although the gifts of the other fairies, such as health, wealth, and beauty, managed to make everyone a little more cheerful.

When the guests were gone, the King and Queen sent for Doctor Pill, the court physician, to consult him in regard to the measures which ought to be taken to prevent the Prince's sneezing. As for the poor Court Astrologer, he was hung up in the sacristy of the cathedral, and every eight days his wife wound him up, with tears.

"What shall we do, doctor?" asked the King rather mournfully.

"The Prince must be preserved from the things which cause sneezing," said the doctor sagely.

"Such as draughts?" suggested the King.

"Draughts, head-colds, snuff, and pepper," answered the leech. "Let his little highness be put into a special suite of rooms; admit no person to them until he has been examined for head-cold, and has put on germ-proof garments; and as his little highness grows older, forbid the use of pepper in his food. Better still, if Your Majesty has a castle in the mountains, let the Prince be taken there for the sake of the purer air."

"There is the tower on the Golden Mountain," said the King.

At this the Queen began to weep again, for she, quite naturally, did not wish to part with her child.

"But, my dear, we can't have him sneezing, and things changing all the time," said the King.

"I beg Your Majesty to consider the danger of a head-cold," put in the doctor.

"Yes, think of the danger of a head-cold," echoed the King, who saw clearer than the Queen the chaos that might result if the Prince was attacked by a prolonged fit of sneezing. "People with head-colds may sneeze ten or fifteen times a day."

"Or fifty," said the doctor.

"Or fifty," echoed the King again, shaking his head, for he was torn between paternal love and kingly duty. "Imagine fifty enchantments in a day! By eventide the whole kingdom would be upset, undone, and the people plotting a revolution."

“The tower on the Golden Mountain is in a fine healthful locality,” said the doctor, “and the Prince could be brought up as happily there as in the palace.”

So at length the Queen consented. In a few days the little Prince, who had not sneezed a second time, was removed to the tower on the Golden Mountain. His room, designed by Doctor Pill, was completely protected from draughts, and every breath of air that entered it was tri-bi-sterilized. Mrs. Pill, who had been a hospital nurse, took care of him. Three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, his royal parents rode out to the tower, and after putting on germ-proof garments, were admitted to the nursery of their infant son.

And so the years went by. Nobody was found able to break Malvolia’s spell, and the clue to its undoing had been carried away by the wind. Malvolia herself had disappeared.

The Prince became a handsome little boy. Accomplished teachers taught him history, music, drawing, dancing, and all the other things that a prince ought to know. But of real life he knew almost nothing at all.

His most faithful friend during these lonely years was a French poodle, who spoke both French and English exceedingly well. Of course, he had a marked canine accent, rather growling his g’s and howling the aw’s and the ow’s, but his words were well chosen and his vocabulary extensive. Never was seen a more friendly, wise, and devoted animal.

When the King decided to have him sent away for a while, for he feared that his son was getting a touch of Poldo’s barky manner of speaking, from too close an association, the little Prince became really ill from grief, and the King was forced to alter his decision.

During his imprisonment in the tower, in spite of all precautions, the Prince sneezed three times. At the first sneeze, all the dogs in the kingdom except Poldo changed into cats, and all the cats into dogs. Though this was not a serious trouble, the change was certainly inconvenient. All the dog-cats came out meowing at people as the dogs used to bark at them, and they chased people down the street; the cat-dogs, on the other hand, stayed in the kitchen under the stove, and watched for mice in the pantry. Great St. Bernards might be seen licking their paws and rubbing them over their foreheads, and fat, old cat-lap-dogs used to try to purr.

At the second sneeze, all the elderly gentlemen over seventy changed into elm trees, a proceeding that caused a terrible lot of trouble.

At the third sneeze, all the people in the pictures at the Art Museum became alive, and for a week the soldiers of the royal guard spent most of their time rescuing poor, bewildered fauns, satyrs, nymphs, Roman senators, and long dead celebrities and historical personages from the worst destitution. The King finally had to build a special castle for them.

As the Prince’s twenty-first birthday drew near, he began to feel very sad at the idea of having to stay shut up in the tower all his life. Though he was a very brave and very manly young man, he lay down on his couch and wept in sorrow.

Suddenly, standing with his forepaws on the coverlet, “Why do you weep, dear master?” said the little dog.

“At my fate,” replied the poor Prince. “I cannot bear to think that I may have to spend all my days in this tower, and never see the great wide world.”

The poodle was silent for a few minutes. At length he said, “Dear Prince Rolandor, do not give up hope. Have you ever thought of consulting my old master, the Giant of the North Pole? He has a large chest in his palace full of secrets which the winds have overheard, and perhaps the key to Malvolia’s spell is among them. If you will have a warm fur coat and four fur boots made for me, I will go to the Giant and ask him.”

The Prince gave his consent, and on the next day the royal tailor made the poodle a magnificent sealskin coat and four splendid fur-lined boots. Then the King wished him good speed, the Queen cried over him, and the Prince, who could see from his high tower every corner of the kingdom, watched him till he disappeared over the hills and far away.

Straight north the poodle ran. Soon he had left the fertile plains behind him, and entered great, black pine forests where never a road was to be seen. The cold wind howled through the trees, and at night the brilliant stars sparkled over the dark and waving branches. Hungry wolves and savage bears often pursued him, but somehow he always managed to escape them all. At the end of the forest he found the frozen ocean lit by the shuddering light of the aurora, flashing in a great fan from east to west. Past white-tusked walruses and sleepy penguins he flew, till on the eleventh day he saw the green, icy pinnacles of the Giant’s palace against the waving curtain of the Polar lights. On the evening of the twelfth day he entered the castle.

The Giant of the North Pole was a tall, strong, yellow-haired fellow wearing a crown of ice and a great sweeping mantle made from the white fur of the polar bear. His servants were the Gusts,—strange, supple, shadowy creatures moving quickly to and fro,—and his courtiers were the whirlwinds and the storms. The Giant’s wife sat by his side; she had dark hair and eyes of icy, burning blue.

“Welcome, little Poldo,” said the Giant; and his voice sounded like the wind in the treetops; “what seek you here?”

“I seek some words of the Fairy Malvolia which were carried away by the northeast wind at Prince Rolandor’s christening,” replied the poodle.

“Whew, oo-oo,” whistled the Giant of the North Pole. “If I have them, the words are yours.”

He summoned two Gusts to bring forth the chest of secrets. It was made of black stone; and edged with diamonds of ice. In it were stored all the mysteries which the wind had ever overheard; there were secrets, confessions, vows, merry laughs, and simple words. And sure enough, in the corner of the chest lay the rest of Malvolia’s spell—a row of little, old-fashioned, dusty words; the words: “Until he finds someone brave enough to marry him.”

So the good poodle learned the words by heart, thanked the Giant, and hurried home with the message. When he came to the King's palace, he ran, barking with joy, right into the King's own room. There he saw the unhappy parents.

"Have you found the last of the sentence?" cried the Queen.

"Yes," said Poldo. "The spell will end when the prince marries."

That very evening the King and the Queen sent forth ambassadors to ask for the hand of the loveliest princess of all Fairyland, Princess Adatha of the Adamant Mountains. But so afraid was Adatha of being turned into something else, that she refused the offer.

The King and the Queen then made a request for the hand of Princess Alicia of the Crystal Lakes. But Alicia also was afraid of being turned into something else, and she too refused the alliance. So did the Princess of the Golden Coasts, the Princess of the Seven Cities, and many others. Finally the only princess left in all Fairyland was a princess who herself lay under an enchantment. A jealous witch had turned her golden hair bright blue, and given her a nose a foot long. This unhappy maiden was the only princess willing to accept poor Rolandor.

The wedding day arrived. The Prince, though perhaps a little pale from his confined life, looked very handsome, and led his ugly bride to the altar like a man. Just exactly as the marriage ceremony was half over, a spasm contorted the muscles of the Prince's face; the poor young man felt strongly inclined to sneeze. Though he could be seen making heroic efforts to control the impulse, the audience got very nervous and panicky.

All was in vain! The Prince sneezed, "Ker choo!" A terrific clap of thunder rent the air, and everybody looked about to see what had happened.

The effect of the sneeze was an odd one. As it had occurred exactly at the moment when the Prince was half-married, the spell had reacted upon itself. "Just like a kick from a gun," Dr. Pill said next day.

The cats became dogs again, and the dogs became cats; the elm trees became cross, elderly gentlemen looking for their families; the poor, excited Roman senators, fauns, nymphs, satyrs, celebrities and historical personages, went back to their pictures; and to cap the climax, the ugly bride became once more her sweet and lovely self.

While everybody was cheering, who should walk out of the sacristy but the Court Astrologer! An instant later, he had fallen into the affectionate arms of the faithful wife who had wound him up for twenty-one years.

After the wedding reception, the Prince and his bride went on a honeymoon to the Enchanted Islands. As for Poldo the poodle, he was created Prime Minister and lived to a fine old age.

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