

The Three Treasures of Giants

Andrew Lang's Fairy Books

Slavic

Intermediate
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Long, long ago, there lived an old man and his wife who had three sons; the eldest was called Martin, the second Michael, while the third was named Jack.

One evening they were all seated round the table, eating their supper of bread and milk.

'Martin,' said the old man suddenly, 'I feel that I cannot live much longer. You, as the eldest, will inherit this hut; but, if you value my blessing, be good to your mother and brothers.'

'Certainly, father; how can you suppose I should do them wrong?' replied Martin indignantly, helping himself to all the best bits in the dish as he spoke. The old man saw nothing, but Michael looked on in surprise, and Jack was so astonished that he quite forgot to eat his own supper.

A little while after, the father fell ill, and sent for his sons, who were out hunting, to bid him farewell. After giving good advice to the two eldest, he turned to Jack.

'My boy,' he said, 'you have not got quite as much sense as other people, but if Heaven has deprived you of some of your wits, it was given you a kind heart. Always listen to what it says, and take heed to the words of your mother and brothers, as well as you are able!' So saying the old man sank back on his pillows and died.

The cries of grief uttered by Martin and Michael sounded through the house, but Jack remained by the bedside of his father, still and silent, as if he were dead also. At length he got up, and going into the garden, hid himself

in some trees, and wept like a child, while his two brothers made ready for the funeral.

No sooner was the old man buried than Martin and Michael agreed that they would go into the world together to seek their fortunes, while Jack stayed at home with their mother. Jack would have liked nothing better than to sit and dream by the fire, but the mother, who was very old herself, declared that there was no work for him to do, and that he must seek it with his brothers.

So, one fine morning, all three set out; Martin and Michael carried two great bags full of food, but Jack carried nothing. This made his brothers very angry, for the day was hot and the bags were heavy, and about noon they sat down under a tree and began to eat. Jack was as hungry as they were, but he knew that it was no use asking for anything; and he threw himself under another tree, and wept bitterly.

'Another time perhaps you won't be so lazy, and will bring food for yourself,' said Martin, but to his surprise Jack answered:

'You are a nice pair! You talk of seeking your fortunes so as not to be a burden on our mother, and you begin by carrying off all the food she has in the house!'

This reply was so unexpected that for some moments neither of the brothers made any answer. Then they offered their brother some of their food, and when he had finished eating they went their way once more.

Towards evening they reached a small hut, and knocking at the door, asked if they might spend the night there. The man, who was a wood-cutter, invited them in, and begged them to sit down to supper. Martin thanked him, but being very proud, explained that it was only shelter they wanted, as they had plenty of food with them; and he and Michael at once opened their bags and began to eat, while Jack hid himself in a corner. The wife, on seeing this, took pity on him, and called him to come and share their supper, which he gladly did, and very good he found it. At this, Martin regretted deeply that he had been so foolish as to refuse, for his bits of bread and cheese seemed very hard when he smelt the savoury soup his brother was enjoying.

'He shan't have such a chance again,' thought he; and the next morning he insisted on plunging into a thick forest where they were likely to meet nobody.

For a long time they wandered hither and thither, for they had no path to guide them; but at last they came

upon a wide clearing, in the midst of which stood a castle. Jack shouted with delight, but Martin, who was in a bad temper, said sharply:

‘We must have taken a wrong turning! Let us go back.’

‘Idiot!’ replied Michael, who was hungry too, and, like many people when they are hungry, very cross also. ‘We set out to travel through the world, and what does it matter if we go to the right or to the left?’ And, without another word, took the path to the castle, closely followed by Jack, and after a moment by Martin likewise.

The door of the castle stood open, and they entered a great hall, and looked about them. Not a creature was to be seen, and suddenly Martin—he did not know why—felt a little frightened. He would have left the castle at once, but stopped when Jack boldly walked up to a door in the wall and opened it. He could not for very shame be outdone by his younger brother, and passed behind him into another splendid hall, which was filled from floor to ceiling with great pieces of copper money.

The sight quite dazzled Martin and Michael, who emptied all the provisions that remained out of their bags, and heaped them up instead with handfuls of copper.

Scarcely had they done this when Jack threw open another door, and this time it led to a hall filled with silver. In an instant his brothers had turned their bags upside down, so that the copper money tumbled out on to the floor, and were shovelling in handfuls of the silver instead. They had hardly finished, when Jack opened yet a third door, and all three fell back in amazement, for this room was a mass of gold, so bright that their eyes grew sore as they looked at it. However, they soon recovered from their surprise, and quickly emptied their bags of silver, and filled them with gold instead. When they would hold no more, Martin said:

‘We had better hurry off now lest somebody else should come, and we might not know what to do’; and, followed by Michael, he hastily left the castle. Jack lingered behind for a few minutes to put pieces of gold, silver, and copper into his pocket, and to eat the food that his brothers had thrown down in the first room. Then he went after them, and found them lying down to rest in the midst of a forest. It was near sunset, and Martin began to feel hungry, so, when Jack arrived, he bade him return to the castle and bring the bread and cheese that they had left there.

'It is hardly worth doing that,' answered Jack; 'for I picked up the pieces and ate them myself.'

At this reply both brothers were beside themselves with anger, and fell upon the boy, beating him, and calling him names, till they were quite tired.

'Go where you like,' cried Martin with a final kick; 'but never come near us again.' And poor Jack ran weeping into the woods.

The next morning his brothers went home, and bought a beautiful house, where they lived with their mother like great lords.

Jack remained for some hours in hiding, thankful to be safe from his tormentors; but when no one came to trouble him, and his back did not ache so much, he began to think what he had better do. At length he made up his mind to go to the castle and take away as much money with him as would enable him to live in comfort for the rest of his life. This being decided, he sprang up, and set out along the path which led to the castle. As before, the door stood open, and he went on till he had reached the hall of gold, and there he took off his jacket and tied the sleeves together so that it might make a kind of bag. He then began to pour in the gold by handfuls, when, all at once, a noise like thunder shook the castle. This was followed by a voice, hoarse as that of a bull, which cried:

'I smell the smell of a man.' And two giants entered.

'So, little worm! it is you who steal our treasures!' exclaimed the biggest. 'Well, we have got you now, and we will cook you for supper!' But here the other giant drew him aside, and for a moment or two they whispered together. At length the first giant spoke:

'To please my friend I will spare your life on condition that, for the future, you shall guard our treasures. If you are hungry take this little table and rap on it, saying, as you do so: "The dinner of an emperor!" and you will get as much food as you want.'

With a light heart Jack promised all that was asked of him, and for some days enjoyed himself mightily. He had everything he could wish for, and did nothing from morning till night; but by-and-by he began to get very tired of it all.

‘Let the giants guard their treasures themselves,’ he said to himself at last; ‘I am going away. But I will leave all the gold and silver behind me, and will take nought but you, my good little table.’

So, tucking the table under his arm, he started off for the forest, but he did not linger there long, and soon found himself in the fields on the other side. There he saw an old man, who begged Jack to give him something to eat.

‘You could not have asked a better person,’ answered Jack cheerfully. And signing to him to sit down with him under a tree, he set the table in front of them, and struck it three times, crying:

‘The dinner of an emperor!’ He had hardly uttered the words when fish and meat of all kinds appeared on it!

‘That is a clever trick of yours,’ said the old man, when he had eaten as much as he wanted. ‘Give it to me in exchange for a treasure I have which is still better. Do you see this cornet? Well, you have only to tell it that you wish for an army, and you will have as many soldiers as you require.’

Now, since he had been left to himself, Jack had grown ambitious, so, after a moment’s hesitation, he took the cornet and gave the table in exchange. The old man bade him farewell, and set off down one path, while Jack chose another, and for a long time he was quite pleased with his new possession. Then, as he felt hungry, he wished for his table back again, as no house was in sight, and he wanted some supper badly. All at once he remembered his cornet, and a wicked thought entered his mind.

‘Two hundred hussars, forward!’ cried he. And the neighing of horses and the clanking of swords were heard close at hand. The officer who rode at their head approached Jack, and politely inquired what he wished them to do.

‘A mile or two along that road,’ answered Jack, ‘you will find an old man carrying a table. Take the table from him and bring it to me.’

The officer saluted and went back to his men, who started at a gallop to do Jack's bidding.

In ten minutes they had returned, bearing the table with them.

'That is all, thank you,' said Jack; and the soldiers disappeared inside the cornet.

Oh, what a good supper Jack had that night, quite forgetting that he owed it to a mean trick. The next day he breakfasted early, and then walked on towards the nearest town. On the way thither he met another old man, who begged for something to eat.

'Certainly, you shall have something to eat,' replied Jack. And, placing the table on the ground he cried:

'The dinner of an emperor!' when all sorts of food dishes appeared. At first the old man ate quite greedily, and said nothing; but, after his hunger was satisfied, he turned to Jack and said:

'That is a very clever trick of yours. Give the table to me and you shall have something still better.'

'I don't believe that there is anything better,' answered Jack.

'Yes, there is. Here is my bag; it will give you as many castles as you can possibly want.'

Jack thought for a moment; then he replied: 'Very well, I will exchange with you.' And passing the table to the old man, he hung the bag over his arm.

Five minutes later he summoned five hundred lancers out of the cornet and bade them go after the old man and fetch back the table.

Now that by his cunning he had obtained possession of the three magic objects, he resolved to return to his native place. Smearing his face with dirt, and tearing his clothes so as to look like a beggar, he stopped the passers by and, on pretence of seeking money or food, he questioned them about the village gossip. In this manner he learned that his brothers had become great men, much respected in all the country round. When he heard that, he lost no time in going to the door of their fine house and imploring them to give him food and shelter; but the only thing he got was hard words, and a command to beg elsewhere. At length, however, at their mother's entreaty, he was told that he might pass the night in the stable. Here he waited until everybody

in the house was sound asleep, when he drew his bag from under his cloak, and desired that a castle might appear in that place; and the cornet gave him soldiers to guard the castle, while the table furnished him with a good supper. In the morning, he caused it all to vanish, and when his brothers entered the stable they found him lying on the straw.

Jack remained here for many days, doing nothing, and—as far as anybody knew—eating nothing. This conduct puzzled his brothers greatly, and they put such constant questions to him, that at length he told them the secret of the table, and even gave a dinner to them, which far outdid any they had ever seen or heard of. But though they had solemnly promised to reveal nothing, somehow or other the tale leaked out, and before long reached the ears of the king himself. That very evening his chamberlain arrived at Jack's dwelling, with a request from the king that he might borrow the table for three days.

'Very well,' answered Jack, 'you can take it back with you. But tell his majesty that if he does not return it at the end of the three days I will make war upon him.'

So the chamberlain carried away the table and took it straight to the king, telling him at the same time of Jack's threat, at which they both laughed till their sides ached.

Now the king was so delighted with the table, and the dinners it gave him, that when the three days were over he could not make up his mind to part with it. Instead, he sent for his carpenter, and bade him copy it exactly, and when it was done he told his chamberlain to return it to Jack with his best thanks. It happened to be dinner time, and Jack invited the chamberlain, who knew nothing of the trick, to stay and dine with him. The good man, who had eaten several excellent meals provided by the table in the last three days, accepted the invitation with pleasure, even though he was to dine in a stable, and sat down on the straw beside Jack.

'The dinner of an emperor!' cried Jack. But not even a morsel of cheese made its appearance.

'The dinner of an emperor!' shouted Jack in a voice of thunder. Then the truth dawned on him; and, crushing the table between his hands, he turned to the chamberlain, who, bewildered and half-frightened, was wondering how to get away.

'Tell your false king that to-morrow I will destroy his castle as easily as I have broken this table.'

The chamberlain hastened back to the palace, and gave the king Jack's message, at which he laughed more than before, and called all his courtiers to hear the story. But they were not quite so merry when they woke next morning and beheld ten thousand horsemen, and as many archers, surrounding the palace. The king saw it was useless to hold out, and he took the white flag of truce in one hand, and the real table in the other, and set out to look for Jack.

'I committed a crime,' said he; 'but I will do my best to make up for it. Here is your table, which I own with shame that I tried to steal, and you shall have besides, my daughter as your wife!'

There was no need to delay the marriage when the table was able to furnish the most splendid banquet that ever was seen, and after everyone had eaten and drunk as much as they wanted, Jack took his bag and commanded a castle filled with all sorts of treasures to arise in the park for himself and his bride.

At this proof of his power the king's heart died within him.

'Your magic is greater than mine,' he said; 'and you are young and strong, while I am old and tired. Take, therefore, the sceptre from my hand, and my crown from my head, and rule my people better than I have done.'

So at last Jack's ambition was satisfied. He could not hope to be more than king, and as long as he had his cornet to provide him with soldiers he was secure against his enemies. He never forgave his brothers for the way they had treated him, though he presented his mother with a beautiful castle, and everything she could possibly wish for. In the centre of his own palace was a treasure chamber, and in this chamber the table, the cornet, and the bag were kept as the most prized of all his possessions, and not a week passed without a visit from king John to make sure they were safe. He reigned long and well, and died a very old man, beloved by his people. But his good example was not followed by his sons and his grandsons. They grew so proud that they were ashamed to think that the founder of their race had once been a poor boy; and as they and all the world could not fail to remember it, as long as the table, the cornet, and the bag were shown in the treasure chamber, one king, more foolish than the rest, thrust them into a dark and damp cellar.

For some time the kingdom remained, though it became weaker and weaker every year that passed. Then, one day, a rumour reached the king that a large army was marching against him. Vaguely he recollected some tales he had heard about a magic cornet which could provide as many soldiers as would serve to conquer the earth,

and which had been removed by his grandfather to a cellar. Thither he hastened that he might renew his power once more, and in that black and slimy spot he found the treasures indeed. But the table fell to pieces as he touched it, in the cornet there remained only a few fragments of leathern belts which the rats had gnawed, and in the bag nothing but broken bits of stone.

And the king bowed his head to the doom that awaited him, and in his heart cursed the ruin wrought by the pride and foolishness of himself and his forefathers.

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