

Summer Short Stories

The Castle of Fortune

One lovely summer morning, just as the sun rose, two travelers started on a journey. They were both strong young men, but one was a lazy fellow and the other was a worker.

As the first sunbeams came over the hills, they shone on a great castle standing on the heights, as far away as the eye could see. It was a wonderful and beautiful castle, all glistening towers that gleamed like marble, and glancing windows that shone like crystal. The two young men looked at it eagerly, and longed to go nearer.

Suddenly, out of the distance, something like a great butterfly, of white and gold, swept toward them. And when it came nearer, they saw that it was a most beautiful lady, robed in floating garments as fine as cobwebs and wearing on her head a crown so bright that no one could tell whether it was of diamonds or of dew. She stood, light as air, on a great, shining, golden ball, which rolled along with her, swifter than the wind. As she passed the travelers, she turned her face to them and smiled.

"Follow me!" she said.

The lazy man sat down in the grass with a discontented sigh. "She has an easy time of it!" he said.

But the industrious man ran after the lovely lady and caught the hem of her floating robe in his grasp. "Who are you, and whither are you going?" he asked.

"I am the Fairy of Fortune," the beautiful lady said, "and that is my castle. You may reach it to-day, if you will; there is

time, if you waste none. If you reach it before the last stroke of midnight, I will receive you there, and will be your friend. But if you come one second after midnight, it will be too late."

When she had said this, her robe slipped from the traveler's hand and she was gone.

The industrious man hurried back to his friend, and told him what the fairy had said.

"The idea!" said the lazy man, and he laughed; "of course, if a body had a horse there would be some chance, but WALK all that way? No, thank you!"

"Then good-by," said his friend, "I am off." And he set out, down the road toward the shining castle, with a good steady stride, his eyes straight ahead.

The lazy man lay down in the soft grass, and looked rather wistfully at the faraway towers. "If I only had a good horse!" he sighed.

Just at that moment he felt something warm nosing about at his shoulder, and heard a little whinny. He turned round, and there stood a little horse! It was a dainty creature, gentle-looking, and finely built, and it was saddled and bridled.

"Hola!" said the lazy man. "Luck often comes when one isn't looking for it!" And in an instant he had leaped on the horse, and headed him for the castle of fortune. The little horse started at a fine pace, and in a very few minutes they overtook the other traveler, plodding along on foot.

"How do you like shank's mare?" laughed the lazy man, as

he passed his friend.

The industrious man only nodded, and kept on with his steady stride, eyes straight ahead.

The horse kept his good pace, and by noon the towers of the castle stood out against the sky, much nearer and more beautiful. Exactly at noon, the horse turned aside from the road, into a shady grove on a hill, and stopped.

"Wise beast," said his rider; "'haste makes waste,' and all things are better in moderation. I'll follow your example, and eat and rest a bit." He dismounted and sat down in the cool moss, with his back against a tree. He had a lunch in his traveler's pouch, and he ate it comfortably. Then he felt drowsy from the heat and the early ride, so he pulled his hat over his eyes, and settled himself for a nap. "It will go all the better for a little rest," he said.

That WAS a sleep! He slept like the seven sleepers, and he dreamed the most beautiful things you could imagine. At last, he dreamed that he had entered the castle of fortune and was being received with great festivities. Everything he wanted was brought to him, and music played while fireworks were set off in his honor. The music was so loud that he awoke. He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and behold, the fireworks were the very last rays of the setting sun, and the music was the voice of the other traveler, passing the grove on foot!

"Time to be off," said the lazy man, and looked about him for the pretty horse. No horse was to be found. The only living thing near was an old, bony, gray donkey. The man called, and whistled, and looked, but no little horse appeared. After a long while he gave it up, and, since there

was nothing better to do, he mounted the old gray donkey and set out again.

The donkey was slow, and he was hard to ride, but he was better than nothing; and gradually the lazy man saw the towers of the castle draw nearer.

Now it began to grow dark; in the castle windows the lights began to show. Then came trouble! Slower, and slower, went the gray donkey; slower, and slower, till, in the very middle of a pitch-black wood, he stopped and stood still. Not a step would he budge for all the coaxing and scolding and beating his rider could give. At last the rider kicked him, as well as beat him, and at that the donkey felt that he had had enough. Up went his hind heels, and down went his head, and over it went the lazy man on to the stony ground.

There he lay groaning for many minutes, for it was not a soft place, I can assure you. How he wished he were in a soft, warm bed, with his aching bones comfortable in blankets! The very thought of it made him remember the castle of fortune, for he knew there must be fine beds there. To get to those beds he was even willing to bestir his bruised limbs, so he sat up and felt about him for the donkey.

No donkey was to be found.

The lazy man crept round and round the spot where he had fallen, scratched his hands on the stumps, tore his face in the briers, and bumped his knees on the stones. But no donkey was there. He would have lain down to sleep again, but he could hear now the howls of hungry wolves in the woods; that did not sound pleasant. Finally, his hand struck against something that felt like a saddle. He grasped it, thankfully, and started to mount his donkey.

The beast he took hold of seemed very small, and, as he mounted, he felt that its sides were moist and slimy. It gave him a shudder, and he hesitated; but at that moment he heard a distant clock strike. It was striking eleven! There was still time to reach the castle of fortune, but no more than enough; so he mounted his new steed and rode on once more. The animal was easier to sit on than the donkey, and the saddle seemed remarkably high behind; it was good to lean against. But even the donkey was not so slow as this; the new steed was slower than he. After a while, however, he pushed his way out of the woods into the open, and there stood the castle, only a little way ahead! All its windows were ablaze with lights. A ray from them fell on the lazy man's beast, and he saw what he was riding: it was a gigantic snail! a snail as large as a calf!

A cold shudder ran over the lazy man's body, and he would have got off his horrid animal then and there, but just then the clock struck once more. It was the first of the long, slow strokes that mark mid- night! The man grew frantic when he heard it. He drove his heels into the snail's sides, to make him hurry. Instantly, the snail drew in his head, curled up in his shell, and left the lazy man sitting in a heap on the ground!

The clock struck twice. If the man had run for it, he could still have reached the castle, but, instead, he sat still and shouted for a horse.

"A beast, a beast!" he wailed, "any kind of a beast that will take me to the castle!"

The clock struck three times. And as it struck the third note, something came rustling and rattling out of the darkness, something that sounded like a horse with harness. The lazy

man jumped on its back, a very queer, low back. As he mounted, he saw the doors of the castle open, and saw his friend standing on the threshold, waving his cap and beckoning to him.

The clock struck four times, and the new steed began to stir; as it struck five, he moved a pace forward; as it struck six, he stopped; as it struck seven, he turned himself about; as it struck eight, he began to move backward, away from the castle!

The lazy man shouted, and beat him, but the beast went slowly backward. And the clock struck nine. The man tried to slide off, then, but from all sides of his strange animal great arms came reaching up and held him fast. And in the next ray of moonlight that broke the dark clouds, he saw that he was mounted on a monster crab!

One by one, the lights went out, in the castle windows. The clock struck ten. Backward went the crab. Eleven! Still the crab went backward. The clock struck twelve! Then the great doors shut with a clang, and the castle of fortune was closed forever to the lazy man.

What became of him and his crab no one knows to this day, and no one cares. But the industrious man was received by the Fairy of Fortune, and made happy in the castle as long as he wanted to stay. And ever afterward she was his friend, helping him not only to happiness for himself, but also showing him how to help others, wherever he went.