

The King Who Was Never Tired

I HEARD a little girl complain yesterday about having to go to bed. "I wish I was never tired," she said. I should like to have told her this story, but of course I couldn't, because Nurse, a tall, rather frowny Nurse, was waiting for the little girl, and, if I had suggested it, she would have frowned at me. I felt I couldn't bear that.

So I write down the story now, in the hope that the little girl who complained about having to go to bed, may some day read it.

I

It is about a King who Never was Tired. No matter what he had been doing all day, no Dustman ever made his eyelids fall over his eyes when Night came. He never felt sleepy.

He used sometimes to go to bed for a little while, just because it was so dull being up all night by himself. But he never enjoyed it; nor woke up early in the morning and heard it strike six, and thought how nice it wasn't seven, and turned over and snuggled down and went to sleep again.

He was a great trouble to his courtiers. Just when they were falling off to sleep, he would rouse them up and say: "Come and play ping-pong on the dining-room table." Of course he couldn't play at anything out of doors, because it was dark. The King liked ping-pong very much, but his courtiers simply hated it for this reason—that he generally made them get up in the night to play it.

If he didn't make them get up in the night, he would have them called very early in the morning to go out hunting, or to see the sun rise. They all loathed sunrises; and to start off for a day's hunting at six o'clock, even though the cook had to get up and cook breakfast, made them quite snappy all day long.

It wasn't as if they went to bed early. They didn't. They weren't allowed to, however sleepy they were. Suppose they were singing songs in the drawing-room, their heads would all begin nodding; and it wasn't a bit of good telling the King they were just keeping time with the music.

He was a pretty sharp King, and he could see through that, as easily as he saw through the courtier who went to sleep one night when the King was reading a book

out loud to him, and made the excuse that he could follow better with his eyes shut.

“Does it help you to snore too?” asked His Majesty. He was all the more annoyed because it was a book he had written himself.

Well, at last the courtiers found this King who was Never Tired such a nuisance, that they drove him out of his kingdom, and told him never to come back until he had learnt to be properly tired at night-time like other people.

II

It was just after tea that the courtiers drove the King out. (Some of them had had an extra cup and more sugar than usual in it, to give them courage.) He wandered away into the twilight, wondering what he should do with himself. The best plan seemed to him to be to walk straight ahead. So he did that.

He went on and on all through the night. Of course he didn't get tired, though he did wish he had as nice a supper as usual, instead of the “bread and cheese” he picked from the hedges and a few apples which dropped out of a cart going along the road which the driver said he might keep.

When it got quite dark, he had to walk along quickly looking straight in front of him, because the bushes at the side of the road, seemed to be stretching out their arms to stop him. Now and then the trees bent down over the road, and he felt as if they were going to catch him up.

But nothing happened to hurt him except that a beetle flew hard into his face. And that didn't really hurt. It only startled him a little.

Very soon there came a rosy light in the sky, and the birds began to tell each other it was time to get up. First they gave little cheeps one by one, as they brought their

heads out from under the bed-clothes (which were really their warm little wings), and then they all chirped together, making a joyful noise, for it was a fine morning and the sun shone bright and hot, and the butterflies flickered among the flowers in the grass.

Just as the King was thinking how nice it would be to find a table laid for breakfast in the forest, with porridge and new milk, and eggs and bacon, and toast and marmalade, and a nice silver tea-pot—he saw several people on horseback coming his way. One of them was evidently a king too, for he wore a crown and beautiful clothes. The others were old and dull, and the King looked as if he thought them a nuisance.

“Who is that?” asked our King of a ploughboy who was whistling up his horses in the next field.

“That’s His Majesty,” said the ploughboy. “But he’s no the kind of King for us. He’s always tired.”

At this you may imagine our King pricked up his ears.

“That’s funny,” he said. “I’ll go and speak to him.”

So he went up and said good-morning very politely, and the other King said good-morning too, and asked him to breakfast at the Palace.

“So you’re always tired,” said our King as they went along.

“Yes, always,” answered his new friend. “I’m always at work. Even when I come out hunting that old Chancellor reads to me out of a great book of laws. Whenever I’m not sitting at a council, or laying a foundation stone, or unveiling a statue, the Poet-Laureate, that little tiny man with the big moustache, recites his poems to me. They’re for ever trying to improve my mind, and I never get a moment to myself.”

Well, the two Kings had breakfast together, just the

kind of breakfast the wanderer had thought about in the forest. They could not talk much, for all the time the Court Newsman read out from a newspaper accounts of all the uninteresting things which had happened the day before. But after breakfast they became great friends, and the King who lived in the Palace asked the other King to stay with him.

So he stayed on for several weeks, and saw what it was that made his friend always tired.

At last he said: "You don't enjoy yourself enough for an ordinary man, let alone a King. Why don't you send away the Chancellor and the Poet-Laureate and the Court Newsman, and the other old fellows? All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy. You want more fun. Then you wouldn't be always tired."

Well, the King thought about this advice; and one day he took it, and sent them all away. He still did his duty as King, but now he enjoyed his playtime and that made him enjoy his work too, and he ceased to be always tired, all through our King's advice.

He would have liked our King to stay with him all his life, but our King said: "No, I must go on and find out why I am never tired, and see if I can't be cured." So he started off again one fine morning, and began walking once more straight on through the forest, just as he had done when his courtiers turned him out of his kingdom.

III

HE had dinner off a nice blackberry bush, with a drink of water from a clean, sparkling stream, and then went on again until tea-time. He was beginning to be quite hungry when he came in sight of a little hut, and as soon as he got up to it, he saw an old man chopping wood in front of the door.

He looked a nice, kind old man, so the King asked if he wasn't going to have tea soon, and might he share it, please, because it was just his tea-time and he wanted it rather badly.

The old man asked him who he was, and while they had tea, with lots of honey but no butter, the King told all about himself.

"Ho-ho," said the old man, "never tired, aren't you? Now, I wonder if you ever did any wood-chopping?"

"No," said the King, "I never did. Is it fun?"

"Fun?" the old man answered; "I don't think I rightly know what that means. But it's very useful work. If I didn't chop wood, the people about here wouldn't have any fires all the winter, and I shouldn't earn my living."

"Could I help you, do you think?" inquired the King.

"You might perhaps," said the wood-cutter, "though I don't suppose useful work is much in your line."

The King said he was afraid not.

"Ever done any useful work in your life?" asked the old man.

"You wouldn't call ping-pong useful, would you?" said the King, doubtfully, and then he had to explain what ping-pong was.

The old wood-cutter laughed heartily, and took the King out to a pile of tree-trunks.

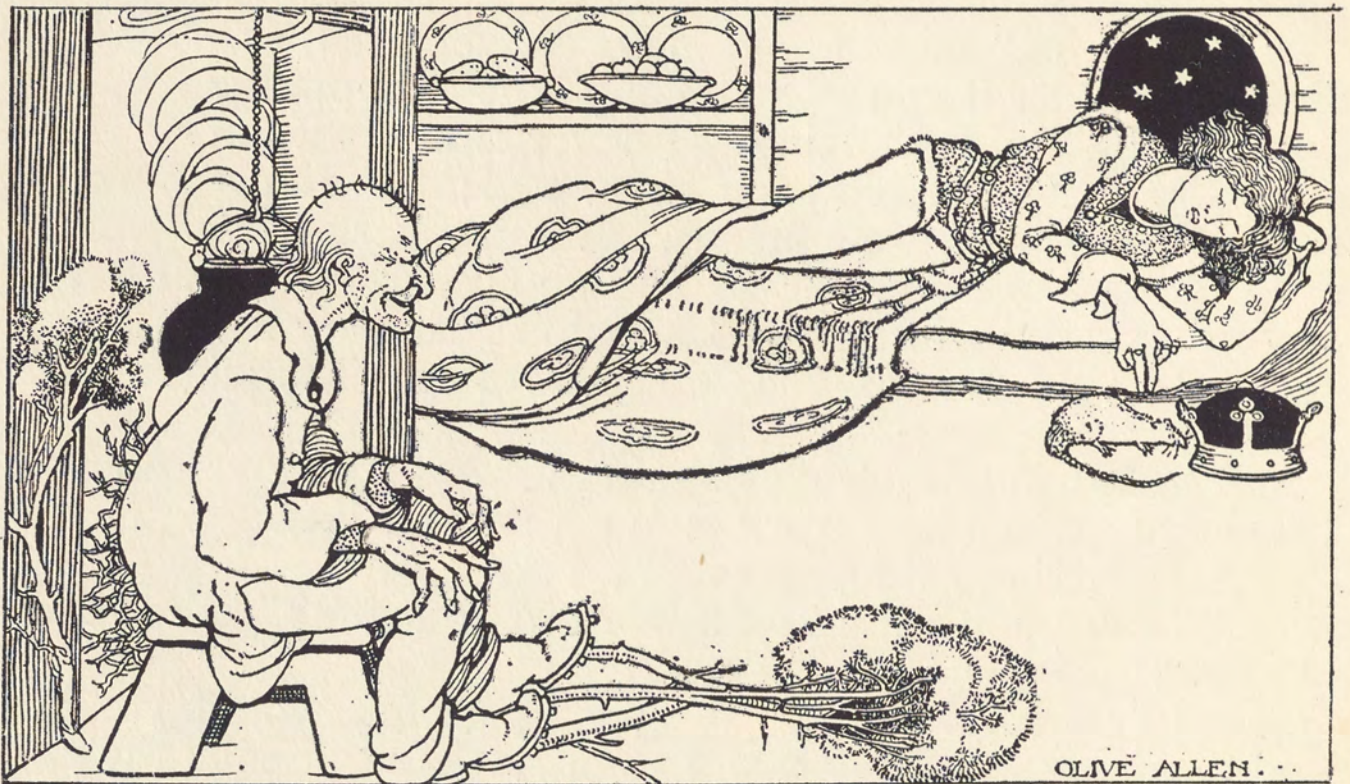
"Now," he said, "if you want to earn your supper, just chop that lot up neatly into faggots for burning."

So the King set to work, and, although he found it rather hard, he had nearly finished the pile when the old man came out and said supper was ready.

The King had never enjoyed a meal more. There was brown bread and more honey, and a dear little apple dumpling each, and some delicious milk, and potatoes

roasted in their skins, and at the end, a bowl of wild strawberries with lots of sugar and cream.

When they had finished and washed up the dishes, and put everything away, they sat down outside the door,



and then the King suddenly felt that something strange was happening to him. His head seemed to have got much heavier than usual. It kept falling on to his shoulder, first to one side, then to the other. His eyes, too, seemed to have got some of the sugar into them, and he couldn't rub it out, however hard he tried.

At last he said to the old man, "I'm afraid I'm going to be ill," and he told him exactly what he felt.

"Ho! ho! ho!" the wood-cutter cried, laughing very much. "Is that it? I suppose I must doctor you, then. Come inside, drink this glass of warm milk, and then lie down on my mattress."

The King did as he was told, and very soon there was nothing to be heard in the hut except snores and chuckles. The snores came from the King, and the chuckles from the old man, who sat by the fire all night because he had not got another mattress.

Early in the morning, the King sat up and rubbed his eyes.

"Feel better?" asked his friend, the wood-cutter.

"I never felt so well in my life," replied the King. "Yet last night I really thought I was quite ill. How is it, I wonder?"

"Haven't you ever felt tired until last night, then?"

"Tired?" said the King, jumping up quickly. "Was that it? Why, then I can go back to my kingdom. But how did I get tired?"

"Because you did some useful work," answered the old wood-cutter. "I've heard people do get tired other ways, but I don't expect it's the right sort of tired."

"Then I must do some woodcutting every day, I suppose."

"That's for you to settle. Wood-cutting is my trade, but perhaps kings have other things to do. Aren't there any folks hungry or unhappy in your kingdom?"

The King thought there were.

"Well, then, your work must be to see that no one need be unhappy or hungry, and that every one does his work properly, and that the bad people are put in prison and the lazy ones whipped to make them industrious."

"I wish," said the King, "you would come back with me and help me to do all this."

“No, no, that would never do.” The old man shook his head. “Every man in his place. Mine’s here. Yours is in your kingdom. And if I were you, I should go back to it as fast as I could, for I can’t stop here talking. I must begin my day’s work.”

So the King thanked the old man very much, and started off again the way he had come. He got back to his kingdom the next day, and found his courtiers glad to see him, especially when they heard that he had learnt the secret he wanted, and that he would never be known any more as the King Who Was Never Tired.

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