

THE KING OF THE POLAR BEARS

The King of the Polar Bears lived among the icebergs in the far north country. He was old and monstrous big; he was wise and friendly to all who knew him. His body was thickly covered with long, white hair that glistened like silver under the rays of themed night sun. His claws were strong and sharp, that he might walk safely over the smooth ice or grasp and tear the fishes and seals upon which he fed.

The seals were afraid when he drew near, and tried to avoid him; but the gulls, both white and gray, loved him because he left the remnants of his feasts for them to devour.

Often his subjects, the polar bears, came to him for advice when ill or in trouble; but they wisely kept away from his hunting grounds, lest they might interfere with his sport and arouse his anger.

The wolves, who sometimes came as far north as the icebergs, whispered among themselves that the King of the Polar Bears was either a magician or under the protection of a powerful fairy. For no earthly thing seemed able to harm him; he never failed to secure plenty of food, and he grew bigger and stronger day by day and year by year.

Yet the time came when this monarch of the north met man, and his wisdom failed him.

He came out of his cave among the icebergs one day and saw a boat moving through the strip of water which had been uncovered by the shifting of the summer ice. In the boat weremen.

The great bear had never seen such creatures before, and therefore advanced toward the boat, sniffing the strange scent with aroused curiosity and wondering whether he might take them for friends or foes, food or carrion.

When the king came near the water's edge a man stood up in the boat and with a queer instrument made a loud "bang!" The polar bear felt a shock; his brain became numb; his thoughts deserted him; his great limbs shook and gave way beneath him and his body fell heavily upon the hard ice.

That was all he remembered for a time.

When he awoke he was smarting with pain on every inch of his huge bulk, for the men had cut away his hide with its glorious white hair and carried it with them to a distant ship.

Above him circled thousands of his friends the gulls, wondering if their benefactor were really dead and it was proper to eat him. But when they saw him raise his head and groan and tremble they knew he still lived, and one of them said to his comrades:

"The wolves were right. The king is a great magician, for even men cannot kill him. But he suffers for lack of covering. Let us repay his kindness to us by each giving him as many feathers as we can spare."

This idea pleased the gulls. One after another they plucked with their beaks the softest feathers from under their wings, and, flying down, dropped them gently upon the body of the King of the Polar Bears.

Then they called to him in a chorus:

"Courage, friend! Our feathers are as soft and beautiful as your own shaggy hair. They will guard you from the cold winds and warm you while you sleep. Have courage, then, and live!"

And the King of the Polar Bears had courage to bear his pain and lived and was strong again.

The feathers grew as they had grown upon the bodies of the birds and covered him as his own hair had done. Mostly they were pure white in color, but some from the gray gulls gave his majesty a slight mottled appearance.

The rest of that summer and all through the six months of night the king left his icy cavern only to fish or catch seals for food. He felt no shame at his feathery covering, but it was still strange to him, and he avoided meeting any of his brother bears.

During this period of retirement he thought much of the men who had harmed him, and remembered the way they had made the great "bang!" And he decided it was best to keep away from such fierce creatures. Thus he added to his store of wisdom.

When the moon fell away from the sky and the sun came to make the icebergs glitter with the gorgeous tintings of the rainbow, two of the polar bears arrived at the king's cavern to ask his advice about the hunting season. But when they saw his great body covered with feathers instead of hair they began to laugh, and one said:

"Our mighty king has become a bird! Whoever before heard of a feathered polar bear?"

Then the king gave way to wrath. He advanced upon them with deep growls and stately tread and with one blow of his monstrous paw stretched the mocker lifeless at his feet.

The other ran away to his fellows and carried the news of the king's strange appearance. The result was a meeting of all the polar bears upon a broad field of ice, where they talked gravely of the remarkable change that had come upon their monarch.

"He is, in reality, no longer a bear," said one; "nor can he justly be called a bird. But he is half bird and half bear, and so unfitted to remain our king."

"Then who shall take his place?" asked another.

"He who can fight the bird-bear and overcome him," answered an aged member of the group. "Only the strongest is fit to rule our race."

There was silence for a time, but at length a great bear moved to the front and said:

"I will fight him; I--Woof--the strongest of our race! And I will be King of the Polar Bears."

The others nodded assent, and dispatched a messenger to the king to say he must fight the great Woof and master him or resign his sovereignty.

"For a bear with feathers," added the messenger, "is no bear at all, and the king we obey must resemble the rest of us."

"I wear feathers because it pleases me," growled the king. "Am I not a great magician? But I will fight, nevertheless, and if Woof masters me he shall be king in my stead."

Then he visited his friends, the gulls, who were even then feasting upon the dead bear, and told them of the coming battle.

"I shall conquer," he said, proudly. "Yet my people are in the right, for only a hairy one like themselves can hope to command their obedience."

The queen gull said:

"I met an eagle yesterday, which had made its escape from a big city of men. And the eagle told me he had seen a monstrous polar bearskin thrown over the back of a carriage that rolled along the street. That skin must have been yours, oh king, and if you wish I will send an hundred of my gulls to the city to bring it back to you."

"Let them go!" said the king, gruffly. And the hundred gulls were soon flying rapidly southward.

For three days they flew straight as an arrow, until they came to scattered houses, to villages, and to cities. Then their search began.

The gulls were brave, and cunning, and wise. Upon the fourth day they reached the great metropolis, and hovered over the streets until a carriage rolled along with a great white bear robe thrown over the back seat. Then the birds swooped down--the whole hundred of them--and seizing the skin in their beaks flew quickly away.

They were late. The king's great battle was upon the seventh day, and they must fly swiftly to reach the Polar regions by that time.

Meanwhile the bird-bear was preparing for his fight. He sharpened his claws in the small crevasses of the ice. He caught a seal and tested his big yellow teeth by crunching its bones between them. And the queen gull set her band to pluming the king bear's feathers until they lay smoothly upon his body.

But every day they cast anxious glances into the southern sky, watching for the hundred gulls to bring back the king's own skin.

The seventh day came, and all the Polar bears in that region gathered around the king's cavern. Among them was Woof, strong and confident of his success.

"The bird-bear's feathers will fly fast enough when I get my claws upon him!" he boasted; and the others laughed and encouraged him.

The king was disappointed at not having recovered his skin, but he resolved to fight bravely without it. He advanced from the opening of his cavern with a proud and kingly bearing, and when he faced his enemy he gave so terrible a growl that Woof's heart stopped beating for a moment, and he began to realize that a fight with the wise and mighty king of his race was no laughing matter.

After exchanging one or two heavy blows with his foe Woof's courage returned, and he determined to dishearten his adversary by bluster.

"Come nearer, bird-bear!" he cried. "Come nearer, that I may pluck your plumage!"

The defiance filled the king with rage. He ruffled his feathers as a bird does, till he appeared to be twice his actual size, and then he strode forward and struck Woof so powerful a blow that his skull crackled like an egg-shell and he fell prone upon the ground.

While the assembled bears stood looking with fear and wonder at their fallen champion the sky became darkened.

An hundred gulls flew down from above and dripped upon the king's body a skin covered with pure white hair that glittered in the sun like silver.

And behold! the bears saw before them the well-known form of their wise and respected master, and with one accord they bowed their shaggy heads in homage to the mighty King of the Polar Bears.

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This story teaches us that true dignity and courage depend not upon outward appearance, but come rather from within; also that brag and bluster are poor weapons to carry into battle.

THE MANDARIN AND THE BUTTERFLY

A mandarin once lived in Kiang-ho who was so exceedingly cross and disagreeable that everyone hated him. He snarled and stormed at every person he met and was never known to laugh or be merry under any circumstances. Especially he hated boys and girls; for the boys jeered at him, which aroused his wrath, and the girls made fun of him, which hurt his pride.

When he had become so unpopular that no one would speak to him, the emperor heard about it and commanded him to emigrate to America. This suited the mandarin very well; but before he left China he stole the Great Book of Magic that belonged to the wise magician Haot-sai. Then, gathering up his little store of money, he took ship for America.

He settled in a city of the middle west and of course started a laundry, since that seems to be the natural vocation of every Chinaman, be he coolie or mandarin.

He made no acquaintances with the other Chinamen of the town, who, when they met him and saw the red button in his hat, knew him for a real mandarin and bowed low before him. He put up a red and white sign and people brought their laundry to him and got paper checks, with Chinese characters upon them, in exchange, this being the only sort of character the mandarin had left.

One day as the ugly one was ironing in his shop in the basement of 263 1/2 Main street, he looked up and saw a crowd of childish faces pressed against the window. Most Chinamen make friends with children; this one hated them and tried to drive them away. But as soon as he returned to his work they were back at the window again, mischievously smiling down upon him.

The naughty mandarin uttered horrid words in the Manchu language and made fierce gestures; but this did no good at all. The children stayed as long as they pleased, and they came again the very next day as soon as school was over, and likewise the next day, and the next. For they saw their presence at the window bothered the Chinaman and were delighted accordingly.

The following day being Sunday the children did not appear, but as the mandarin, being a heathen, worked in his little shop a big butterfly flew in at the open door and fluttered about the room.

The mandarin closed the door and chased the butterfly until he caught it, when he pinned it against the wall by sticking two pins through its beautiful wings. This did not hurt the butterfly, there being no feeling in its wings; but it made him a safe prisoner.

This butterfly was of large size and its wings were exquisitely marked by gorgeous colors laid out in regular designs like the stained glass windows of a cathedral.

The mandarin now opened his wooden chest and drew forth the Great Book of Magic he had stolen from Haot-sai. Turning the pages slowly he came to a passage describing "How to understand the language of butterflies." This he read carefully

and then mixed a magic formula in a tin cup and drank it down with a wry face. Immediately thereafter he spoke to the butterfly in its own language, saying:

"Why did you enter this room?"

"I smelled bees-wax," answered the butterfly; "therefore I thought I might find honey here."

"But you are my prisoner," said the mandarin. "If I please I can kill you, or leave you on the wall to starve to death."

"I expect that," replied the butterfly, with a sigh. "But my race is short lived, anyway; it doesn't matter whether death comes sooner or later."

"Yet you like to live, do you not?" asked the mandarin.

"Yet; life is pleasant and the world is beautiful. I do not seek death."

"Then," said the mandarin, "I will give you life--a long and pleasant life--if you will promise to obey me for a time and carryout my instructions."

"How can a butterfly serve a man?" asked the creature, in surprise.

"Usually they cannot," was the reply. "But I have a book of magic which teaches me strange things. Do you promise?"

"Oh, yes; I promise," answered the butterfly; "for even as your slave I will get some enjoyment out of life, while should you kill me--that is the end of everything!"

"Truly," said the mandarin, "butterflies have no souls, and therefore cannot live again."

"But I have enjoyed three lives already," returned the butterfly, with some pride. "I have been a caterpillar and a chrysalis before I became a butterfly. You were never anything but a Chinaman, although I admit your life is longer than mine."

"I will extend your life for many days, if you will obey me," declared the Chinaman. "I can easily do so by means of my magic."

"Of course I will obey you," said the butterfly, carelessly.

"Then, listen! You know children, do you not?--boys and girls?"

"Yes, I know them. They chase me, and try to catch me, as you have done," replied the butterfly.

"And they mock me, and jeer at me through the window," continued the mandarin, bitterly. "Therefore, they are your enemies and mine! But with your aid and the help of the magic book we shall have a fine revenge for their insults."

"I don't care much for revenge," said the butterfly. "They are but children, and 'tis natural they should wish to catch such a beautiful creature as I am."

"Nevertheless, I care! and you must obey me," retorted the mandarin, harshly. "I, at least, will have my revenge."

Then he stuck a drop of molasses upon the wall beside the butterfly's head and said:

"Eat that, while I read my book and prepare my magic formula."

So the butterfly feasted upon the molasses and the mandarin studied his book, after which he began to mix a magic compound in the tin cup.

When the mixture was ready he released the butterfly from the wall and said to it:

"I command you to dip your two front feet into this magic compound and then fly away until you meet a child. Fly close, whether it be a boy or a girl, and touch the child upon its forehead with your feet. Whosoever is thus touched, the book declares, will at once become a pig, and will remain such forever after. Then return to me and dip your legs afresh in the contents of this cup. So shall all my enemies, the children, become miserable swine, while no one will think of accusing me of the sorcery."

"Very well; since such is your command, I obey," said the butterfly. Then it dipped its front legs, which were the shortest of the six, into the contents of the tin cup, and flew out of the door and away over the houses to the edge of the town. There it alighted in a flower garden and soon forgot all about its mission to turn children into swine.

In going from flower to flower it soon brushed the magic compound from its legs, so that when the sun began to set and the butterfly finally remembered its master, the mandarin, it could not have injured a child had it tried.

But it did not intend to try.

"That horrid old Chinaman," it thought, "hates children and wishes to destroy them. But I rather like children myself and shall not harm them. Of course I must return to my master, for he is a magician, and would seek me out and kill me; but I can deceive him about this matter easily enough."

When the butterfly flew in at the door of the mandarin's laundry he asked, eagerly:

"Well, did you meet a child?"

"I did," replied the butterfly, calmly. "It was a pretty, golden-haired girl--but now 'tis a grunting pig!"

"Good! Good! Good!" cried the mandarin, dancing joyfully about the room. "You shall have molasses for your supper, and to-morrow you must change two children into pigs."

The butterfly did not reply, but ate the molasses in silence. Having no soul it had no conscience, and having no conscience it was able to lie to the mandarin with great readiness and a certain amount of enjoyment.

Next morning, by the mandarin's command, the butterfly dipped its legs in the mixture and flew away in search of children.

When it came to the edge of the town it noticed a pig in a sty, and alighting upon the rail of the sty it looked down at the creature and thought.

"If I could change a child into a pig by touching it with the magic compound, what could I change a pig into, I wonder?"

Being curious to determine this fine point in sorcery the butterfly fluttered down and touched its front feet to the pig's nose. Instantly the animal disappeared, and in its place was a shock-headed, dirty looking boy, which sprang from the sty and ran down the road uttering loud whoops.

"That's funny," said the butterfly to itself. "The mandarin would be very angry with me if he knew of this, for I have liberated one more of the creatures that bother him."

It fluttered along after the boy, who had paused to throw stones at a cat. But pussy escaped by running up a tree, where thick branches protected her from the stones. Then the boy discovered a newly-planted garden, and trampled upon the beds until the seeds were scattered far and wide, and the garden was ruined. Next he caught up a switch and struck with it a young calf that stood quietly grazing in a field. The poor creature ran away with piteous bleats, and the boy laughed and followed after it, striking the frightened animal again and again.

"Really," thought the butterfly, "I do not wonder the mandarin hates children, if they are all so cruel and wicked as this one."

The calf having escaped him the boy came back to the road, where he met two little girls on their way to school. One of them had a red apple in her hand, and the boy snatched it away and began eating it. The little girl commenced to cry, but her companion, more brave and sturdy, cried out:

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself, you nasty boy!"

At this the boy reached out and slapped her pretty face, where upon she also began to sob.

Although possessed of neither soul nor conscience, the butterfly had a very tender heart, and now decided it could endure this boy no longer.

"If I permitted him to exist," it reflected, "I should never forgive myself, for the monster would do nothing but evil from morning 'til night."

So it flew directly into his face and touched his forehead with its sticky front feet.

The next instant the boy had disappeared, but a grunting pig ran swiftly up the road in the direction of its sty.

The butterfly gave a sigh of relief.

"This time I have indeed used the mandarin's magic upon a child," it whispered, as it floated lazily upon the light breeze; "but since the child was originally a pig I do not think I have any cause to reproach myself. The little girls were sweet and gentle, and I would not injure them to save my life, but were all boys like this transformed pig, I should not hesitate to carry out the mandarin's orders."

Then it flew into a rose bush, where it remained comfortably until evening. At sundown it returned to its master.

"Have you changed two of them into pigs?" he asked, at once.

"I have," replied the butterfly. "One was a pretty, black-eyed baby, and the other a freckle-faced, red-haired, barefooted new boy."

"Good! Good! Good!" screamed the mandarin, in an ecstasy of delight. "Those are the ones who torment me the most! Change every new boy you meet into a pig!"

"Very well," answered the butterfly, quietly, and ate its supper of molasses.

Several days were passed by the butterfly in the same manner. It fluttered aimlessly about the flower gardens while the sun shone, and returned at night to the mandarin with false tales of turning children into swine. Sometimes it would be one child which was transformed, sometimes two, and occasionally three; but the mandarin always greeted the butterfly's report with intense delight and gave him molasses for supper.

One evening, however, the butterfly thought it might be well to vary the report, so that the mandarin might not grow suspicious; and when its master asked what child had been had been changed into a pig that day the lying creature answered:

"It was a Chinese boy, and when I touched him he became a black pig."

This angered the mandarin, who was in an especially cross mood. He spitefully snapped the butterfly with his finger, and nearly broke its beautiful wing; for he forgot that Chinese boys had once mocked him and only remembered his hatred for American boys.

The butterfly became very indignant at this abuse from the mandarin. It refused to eat its molasses and sulked all the evening, for it had grown to hate the mandarin almost as much as the mandarin hated children.

When morning came it was still trembling with indignation; but the mandarin cried out:

"Make haste, miserable slave; for to-day you must change four children into pigs, to make up for yesterday."

The butterfly did not reply. His little black eyes were sparkling wickedly, and no sooner had he dipped his feet into the magic compound than he flew full in the mandarin's face, and touched him upon his ugly, flat forehead.

Soon after a gentleman came into the room for his laundry. The mandarin was not there, but running around the place was a repulsive, scrawny pig, which squealed most miserably.

The butterfly flew away to a brook and washed from its feet all traces of the magic compound. When night came it slept in a rosebush.