

A FORTUNE IN AN EMPTY WALLET.

IN the north of England, several hundred years ago, there lived a young knight. He was very poor, as his father had spent all his money, and the only things of value that he left his son were a white horse of wonderful beauty and a very curious old sword. Edgar--that was the knight's name--was obliged to leave his home, for he had no money to spend in keeping up a large house; and, besides, his father had been deeply in debt, and the tradesmen were clamouring for their bills to be paid, and threatening to put him in prison if he did not pay them. So, having filled two bundles with clothes and food, he mounted his horse and rode off to seek his fortune abroad.

He had been journeying along for several days, not knowing where to go or what to do, when one evening he found himself riding through a dark and gloomy forest. He was thinking to himself how dismal his future looked, and was wondering how he should be able to make a living, when all of a sudden his horse started, reared up on his hind-legs, and then stood quite still, trembling with fright.

Edgar looked around him, and saw, standing under the shadow of an old yew-tree, the figure of an aged man. His form was bent with years, and he leaned for support on a thick knotted stick. His clothes were patched and torn, his toes peeped out from his worn-out boots, while in one hand he carried an old wallet, which had been carefully mended, and which evidently contained something that he greatly valued.

As soon as Edgar's horse stopped short, the old man came near, and asked for alms.

"You have come to the wrong person," replied Edgar; "for though I would gladly help you if I could, I expect that I am quite as poor as you are, except that I still have my sword and my good steed."

The old man looked earnestly at the sword, and his eyes sparkled as he asked eagerly--

"Where did you get that sword from?"

"My father gave it to me," replied Edgar; "and he brought it home with him when he returned from the wars beyond the seas."

"Noble knight!" returned the old man, "in my wallet I have a jewel that is beyond price. That sword of yours takes my fancy, and if you like to exchange it for my wallet and what it contains, I assure you that you will not repent it."

"Let me first see the jewel," said Edgar; for although he was very anxious to get it, he wanted first of all to make quite sure that it was really there.

"Before I let you have my wallet I must have your sword," said the old man; "but if you do not like your bargain, I will give it you back again. You see I cannot possibly run away with it, for you are on horse-back, while I am on foot."

At first Edgar refused to do this, but at last he agreed; for he thought to himself that he could easily get the sword back, as of course the old man could not run as fast as his horse. He therefore handed down his sword and received the old wallet in exchange.

He opened it eagerly, but to his rage and dismay found that it was empty. In his anger he turned round so suddenly, that by accident he touched his horse with his spur. The horse at once began to gallop off, and it had carried him some distance before he could stop it.

When he returned to the spot where he had given up his sword, he at first saw nothing of the beggar, but happening to look up, to his great surprise he saw him sitting in the top of a tall tree, having climbed there so as to be out of his reach.

"Honoured knight!" cried the beggar, "forgive me for playing you such a trick, and rest assured that you shall not in the end suffer for it. This sword which I hold in my hand belonged to my great-grandfather, who was killed in the first crusade, and it has chanced to become your property in some way or other. I knew it at once by the curious hilt, of which the cross-piece is, as you know, turned up at one end and down at the other. Give me your knightly word that you will not harm me, and I will come down and explain to you how it is that I value the sword so highly. Of one thing you may be certain--I shall not deceive you again. And what I tell you will be of great service to you."

Edgar promised the beggar that he should be safe, and the latter began to scramble down from his uncomfortable perch. But, wonderful to relate, he was quite changed, and was now a handsome youth, though still dressed in the same tattered old clothes.

"My name," said the beggar, "is Bertram; and to you I owe a debt of gratitude that I can never repay, for by means of this sword I can win back the castle and lands of my ancestors, from which I have been lately driven to wander about in the

guise of an old beggar. Henceforth we will be as brothers, and the half of my lands shall be yours; for had it not been for you, they would never again have become mine. But let me tell you my story.

"Three years ago my father died, and I became heir to all his estates; but my step-mother was a wicked woman, and hated me with all her might. Twelve months since she married again, and both she and her husband set to work to drive me from my home. Many of their attempts failed; but at last they secured the help of an old wizard, who turned me into a beggar. Of course nobody recognized me in this disguise, and my own servants only laughed and jeered when I told them who I was, and my step-father drove me from the castle with blows that I was too feeble to resist.

"I begged him to have mercy, but he only laughed; and the wizard, who was standing by him, said, 'A beggar you must remain until you find your great-grandfather's sword:' then they slammed the door in my face.

"My father thought that he was perfectly safe to keep the castle for ever, as he believed the sword had been lost in a foreign land, and that I never could possibly find it again. But chance has brought it to me when I least expected it, and at a time when I am within a mile of my castle. Come, my friend, let us go and take possession, for I know that the wizard spoke the truth when he said that I should enjoy my own again when I got this sword, because already half of what he said has come true, since I am once more my own self, instead of being an old beggar."

Edgar took Bertram up behind him on his horse, and together they rode off to the castle, which was not far distant. Leaving the horse tied to a tree, they drew near to the gate, when they heard shouts and songs and music, from which they knew that a great feast was being held.

"This way," said Bertram; and they ran down a narrow passage, then up a steep flight of stairs which led to a platform, from which they could look into the courtyard. A wonderful scene met their eyes. The courtyard was full of people, who were eating, drinking, singing, and enjoying themselves to their hearts' content. Two funny men were so happy that they were kissing each other; and in the middle several servants, with their long sharp knives, were cutting up an ox that had been roasted whole, while a number more were bringing in fresh dishes of delicacies, such as peacocks, truffles, and boars' heads.

Bertram quickly looked around, and whispering to Edgar--"He is not here," motioned him to follow, and ran down the stairs again.

They passed through many passages and rooms, meeting no one, for everybody

seemed to be helping at the feast. At length they reached a stone terrace that ran along outside the wall of the castle. They walked along this, until Bertram suddenly stopped opposite a large window, and signed to Edgar to look through.

He did so, and saw a man seated at a table with a lot of money before him, which he was paying away as fast as he could to several wicked-looking Jews with fur caps, who were putting it into bags, and carrying it away.

"The wretch!" said Bertram; "see how he is wasting my money. Let us dash in upon him through the window, so that he may see his day is over." So saying, he jumped right through the window on to the floor, closely followed by Edgar.

At the sound of the breaking of glass the Jews looked up, and seeing two strange figures coming through the window, they ran off as fast as they could, leaving their money behind, and shouting out that they had seen a spirit. His step-father fainted with terror, but the old steward at once knew his master again, and kneeling down, kissed his hand, blessing the day that had brought him back once more. Soon all the servants came running in, having heard the shouts of the Jews as they rushed away. Their delight at again seeing their young master, whom they had mourned as dead, was beyond bounds, and they brought him beautiful clothes, and took away his ragged garments, while his wicked step-father was hurried off to prison.

They then conducted him to the courtyard, and seated him in the chair of state, after which they served the banquet that had been prepared for his step-father. But amidst all his happiness Bertram did not forget his friend Edgar, who had been the means of restoring his inheritance to him. Taking him by the hand, he led him to the seat of honour, saying aloud as he did so,--

"Henceforth we are brothers, and everything shall belong to both of us equally. But for you, I should still be wandering about in the forest; so the least I can do is to share my good-fortune with you."

Bertram and Edgar lived together for many years, beloved by all; and Edgar never repented the day when he exchanged his sword for an empty wallet.