

Tales from silver lands

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TALES FROM SILVER LANDS

A TALE OF THREE TAILS

DOWN in Honduras there is a town called Pueblo de Chamelecón which is not much of a town after all. There is only one street in it, and the houses are like big beehives that have been squared up, and the roofs are of straw. There is no sidewalk, no roadway, and the houses are unfenced, so that you step from the room into the sandy street and, because of the heat, when you are inside you wish that you were out, and when you are outside you wish that you were in. So the children of the place spend much time down at the little river. At least they did when I was there.

I rode there on a donkey and, the day being hot, let the animal graze, or sleep, or think, or dream, or work out problems—or whatever it is that a donkey does with his spare time—and I watched the children in the water. There was one, a little baby just able to toddle around, who crawled down to the water's edge, rolled in and swam about like a little dog, much as the babies of Tierra del Fuego will swim in the icy waters of the Far South. He came out on my side of the water, as lively as a grig, smiling every bit as friendly as any other little chap of his age, white, brown, or yellow.

I stayed there that night because the day did not get cool and in the evening the people sat outside of their houses and played the guitar and sang. Now I had with me a little musical instrument like a tiny organ, which I bought in France, and it was so compact and handy that I could carry it everywhere as easily as I could a blanket. In fact, I used to ride with it behind my saddle, wrapped in my bedding. Well, as the people seemed to like their music, I brought out mine, so we had a very jolly concert, in spite of my poor voice, which they politely pretended not to notice. Then later, from curiosity, the children came about me and, to amuse them as well as myself, having done so badly at the singing, I did a few tricks with wads of rolled paper and a couple of tin cups, and the little boy who had swum across the pond laughed as loudly as any one there. That pleased his father mightily, so much indeed that he brought me a cup of goat's milk and some cassava bread and told me that I was a fine fellow. To please me further, he sang a very, very long song. It was all about the parrot and the wonderful things it did, a parrot that had lived long among people and learned their songs, and when the bird flew back to the forest, it still sang, and so well that all the other parrots in the forest learned to sing the song from beginning to end. But what was curious was that at the end of every other verse, there was this line:

When the rat had a tail like a horse.

So when he had done I asked him about that, for all the rats I had seen had tails which were far from beautiful, according to my notion.

The man listened gravely, then said: "But certainly, once the rat had a tail like a horse."

“When was that?” I asked.

“When the rabbit had a tail like a cat,” he said.

“But I am still puzzled,” I told him. “Was it long ago?”

“It was when the deer’s tail was plumed like the tail of a dog,” he told me.

As we talked, a kind of polite silence was upon all the people gathered about us; then a very, very old woman who was smoking a cigar nodded her head and said: “But Tio Ravenna is right. It was in the days of Hunbatz, who lived on beetles and spiders, and I heard it from my mother’s mother, and she from the mother of her mother.” Then the old woman went on smoking with her eyes closed, and all who were there nodded at one another, thinking, I suppose, that the old grandmother would presently tell the story. But of course, they who knew her well were wiser than to ask her to tell the Tale of Three Tails, so every one waited.

Presently, a little girl gave the old grandmother a piece of sugar and asked: “Was it two brothers, or three, who had to clear the great forest? I am not sure.”

At that the little old lady’s eyes were bright and she threw away her cigar and said:

“Two brothers. That I have told you before.” After a little sigh, which was only pretending that she was weary of telling the tale, she said: “You know that I have told it to you before, and it is wrong that I should have to tell it so often. But you see this.”

So saying, she took from her bosom, where she had it fastened to a silk thread, a little piece of jade and let us see it. It was broken

from a larger piece, but we could make out on it a carving which I saw to be a deer with a tail like a sheep dog's. We passed it about and every one looked at it carefully, although certainly all of them must have seen it time and time again, and when it came to the old grandmother again she replaced it and told us the Tale of Three Tails, just as I have written it here.

Once, long ago, the rat had a beautiful tail like a horse, with long sweeping hairs, though it was before my time of life. It was in the days of old Hunbatz, and he was a wizard who lived in the dark of the great forest that used to be on the other side of the big river. In those days things were not as now and animals were different; some larger, some smaller. The deer, as you have seen on the stone I showed you, had a tail like a dog, and the rabbit's tail was long and furry like the tail of a cat.

Now in that land there was a hunter with whom neither lasso nor arrow ever failed, and he had two sons, beautiful to look at and brave of heart, stout and quick of foot. Not only did the brothers work better than any men had ever worked, but they could play ball and sing, throwing the ball higher than birds could fly, and singing in a way that brought the wild things to hear them. Nor was there living creature able to run as swiftly as the two brothers. The birds alone could outrace them.

The brothers being grown, their father thought that it was time for them to make a home for themselves, so chose a place on the farther side of the forest, and told them to clear it, which, he said, could be done in seven days. It was no little forest, you must remember, but a vast place, where sunlight never pierced, and the roots of trees were like great ropes; a jungle that stretched for miles and miles and the tangle in it was so thick that a monkey could

barely get through without squeezing. Deep in the forest there was a blackness like the blackness of night. The trunks of the trees were so large that three men holding hands could not circle them and where there were no trees, there were vines and snakelike lianas and thorn-bushes and flowers so great that a man could lie down to sleep in the shade of them.

The first day the brothers took a great space, piling the trees at one corner, clearing the tangle and leaving all as smooth as the water of a lake. They sang as they worked, and they sang as they rested in the heat of the day, and the organ bird and the flute bird answered them from the gold-green shade. So pleasant was their music that the old iguana, though he was as big as a man, came from his resting place in the trees to listen.

Seeing how things were going, old Hunbatz in the dark of the forest grew very angry, fearing that his hiding place would soon dwindle and vanish. So he went to the great gray owl, his friend, and they talked the matter over between them. The owl told Hunbatz that he must set the father's heart against the brothers, telling him that the boys were lazy and instead of working spent their time in playing with the ball and in singing.

“Go,” said the owl, “to their father, and when he asks how the lads fare with their work, say to him:

They sing and they play
For half of the day.

It may fall out that he will grow angry and cut off their heads, and thus the forest will be safe for us.”

That seemed to the wizard to be good advice, and before the close of the day's work, old Hunbatz, who could fly by flapping his hands in a certain way like a swimmer, cast himself into the air and flew with great swiftness to the place where the father lived. But he took care to dress himself like a woodman.

"Well met," said the father, seeing Hunbatz, but thinking him no wizard of course. "From where do you come?"

"From the other side of the forest," was the reply.

"Then perchance you saw my two sons who are clearing the forest," said the father.

"I did," said Hunbatz.

"And how are the boys doing?" asked the father.

At that old Hunbatz shook his head sadly and answered, as the owl had told him:

"They sing and they play
For half of the day."

That, you know, was quite untrue, for while they sang, there was no stopping of work, and as for the play, it is true that they threw the ball from one to the other, but so clever were they that one would throw the ball so high that it would take hours and hours before it came down again, and of course, while it was in the air, the brothers went on working.

"I would cut off their heads to teach them a lesson," said Hunbatz, "if they were sons of mine." Then he turned on his heel and went away, not flying until he was out of the father's sight, for he did not wish any man to know that he was a wizard.

To be sure, the good man was grieved and his face clouded, when he heard the tale of Hunbatz, but he said nothing, and, a short time after, the brothers came home. He was much surprised when, asking the lads how much work they had done that day, they told him that they had cleared off the space of forest he had bidden them to. After much thought he told them that the next day they would have to do twice as much as before. The brothers thought the new task hard, but they went to work with a good will and on the second day the trees fell like corn before a man with a machete, and before night they had finished that which they had been given to do.

Again old Hunbatz flew through the air to the father and tried to set him against the boys, and again that night, when the boys were home, their task was set for the next day twice as much as the day before.

It was the same the third day, and the fourth, until at last the boys came to a point where by the mightiest working they could not move a stick or a blade of grass more. And yet, because of old Hunbatz, the father set them a task still greater.

On the fifth day things looked very hopeless for the boys, and their hearts were sad as they looked at the forest and saw the task that their father had set them to do. They went to work feeling for the first time it would be impossible for the sun to go down on their finished task, and the heart of old Hunbatz was glad. But the birds in the forest were silent that morning, for they too knew that there were sad hearts in the brothers. Even the grasshoppers and the mosquitoes and the bees were still, and as for the boys, not a note of joy could they raise.

Then to them came the iguana, wise old lizard who knew everything that went on in the forest, and as soon as he had heard what the brothers had to say he smiled and called on them to listen, after making sure that there was no living creature to hear except the birds, for of them he had no fear, knowing that the birds tell no secrets.

“Be cheerful,” said the iguana, “and I will tell you a charm. It is this: mark about the handles of your working tools rings of black, white, red, and green, and before you start to work, sing:

I must do what I can,
Is the thought of a man,

and if your hearts are brave, you will see what happens.”

Having said this and smiled on the brothers, the old iguana climbed into a tree and stretched himself along the branch of it where he could best see, and the birds gathered in a great circle, a matchless melody going up to the sky.

So the brothers took their axes, their spades, their hoes, and their machetes, and painted about the handles of them rings of black and of white and of red and of green, and their voices rang sweet and clear as they sang, as the iguana had told them:

“I must do what I can,
Is the thought of a man.”

No sooner had the last words passed than the whole company of birds broke out into a chorus, singing, chattering, chirping, whistling, screaming, each according to its manner and, without hands touching them, axes went to work cutting down trees, machetes chopped at lianas and vines, spades cleared and dug; and

trees, bushes, and weeds piled themselves in great heaps at the edge of the clearing, so that in less than an hour the whole task was done. Then it was that all things in the forest were glad and the good iguana smiled broadly. The very monkeys joined in and, catching the ball which the brothers threw, tossed it from tree to tree until it passed through the whole jungle and back again.

But old Hunbatz was angry beyond measure, so angry that he whirled about on his heels three hundred times, turning so rapidly that he looked like a storm cloud, and his long whiskers were tangled about him like a mantle. But the faster he whirled, the more his anger boiled, and, flapping his hands, he shot into the air, going so swiftly that his very clothes were scorched.

“How are the boys?” asked the father, when Hunbatz stood before him.

For answer, Hunbatz screamed: “Your boys are idle fellows!

They sing and they play
For half of the day.

Had I such sons, I would cut their heads off to teach them a lesson.”

Said the father: “To-morrow I shall go to the forest, and if you have not spoken truth, then this arrow which has never yet missed a mark shall find one in your heart. But if it is as you say, then my sons shall feel my anger.”

Old Hunbatz did not like that at all, for well he knew that the hunter’s arrows were never wasted. So back he flew to the owl and the two of them whispered together. That night there was a great gathering of the animals: of the hare, the deer, the rat, the jaguar,

the puma, the opossum, and many others. The rat, the deer, and the rabbit led them, and in a wonderfully short time, not only were all things restored and the work of the day undone, but the trees and the bushes and the vines and the lianas that had been moved on the other days were put back in their old places, growing and blooming, so that all was as though the brothers had never been at the forest at all.

Sad was the hour the next morning when the hunter came with his two sons and saw the forest as though hand had never touched it. The brothers could not believe their eyes. Grinning from the thick of a rubber tree was the face of Hunbatz, and on his shoulder was the owl. For a moment the father thought to cut off the heads of the lads to teach them a lesson, but on second thought he told them that he would give them another chance.

“What should have been done is not done,” he said. “I will grant you a day and a night to clear all the forest as you told me it was cleared. To-morrow morning I will come again, and see whether all is well done.” At that he left them and went his way.

No sooner had he gone than the two brothers went to see the iguana, who told them of the witchery of the owl and Hunbatz and bade them to act as before. So they made the ring about the handles of their working tools once more and sang:

“I must do what I can,
Is the thought of a man,”

and, as on the day before, axes, machetes, and spades went to work and in a short time all was clear again. Then the iguana told the brothers of the evil that Hunbatz had done and bade them set traps and keep watch that night. So three traps were made and set, and

when night fell, from all parts of the forest there came animals led by the rat, the deer, and the rabbit, and old Hunbatz and the owl watched from the dark caves of the leaves.

No sooner had the first three animals stepped into the clearing than they were caught fast in the traps, whereupon the rest of the animals turned and fled. Then the brothers rushed to the traps. The rabbit gave a great jump when he felt the jaws close upon his beautiful catlike tail, but it was chopped off close to the body. The deer, with his tail like a plume, fared no better. So both deer and rabbit fled to the woods ashamed, and, as you see for yourself, have had no tails ever since. As for the rat, he was far too wise to jump as the rabbit and deer had done. But seeing the brothers coming, he pulled and pulled and pulled so that all the beautiful hair was stripped, leaving him with but a bare and ugly thing of a tail as you see to-day.

The next morning when the hunter-father came, there was the forest cleared and all in good order as the boys had said. So he sought out old Hunbatz, who flapped his hands and flew for very fear. But so fast he went that his clothes were burnt off, and his skin was baked into a hard crust by the great heat, and he fell to the earth and so became what we call an armadillo. As for the two brothers, they lived very happily for many, many years, and things went well with them and the land they lived in was a land of good harvest and fruit trees.

So now you know the Tale of Three Tails and if you do not believe it, look at the rat and the deer and the rabbit and the armadillo, and see for yourself.



THE MAGIC DOG

DOWN where the forest is so thick that the sun rarely pierces the leafy roof, where there are mosses and ferns and little plants of the brightest green, where parrots screech and thousands of little monkeys chatter in the trees, there stands a great white temple. Once, long ago, there was joy and gladness there, and flower-crowned people danced and sang, but now vines hang about the doors and window holes and there are tall rank weeds in the courtyard. Still, it is even now very beautiful, though sad to see.

Long years before this temple was built, there lived a king, and his people loved him, and he on his part loved not only his people, but every flower that grew, every grass blade and every leaf on bush and tree. Where he came from, none knew, but there were those who said that he had come from the sea, not in a ship with men, but alone, in a great and beautiful sea-shell. So they called him, in their own tongue, The King Who Came in a Sea-shell. And when he went about among his people he wore a headdress of gold-green feathers, a feather cloak of turquoise blue, and about his middle was a golden belt set with glittering precious stones. On his feet were golden sandals and in his hand he bore a great spear of silver.

The spear he carried for a sign only, for there was no fighting in those days, and it was a time when all went very well. Every one had enough to eat and to drink and to wear, so that none had to worry about the day to come. Men loved diamonds and emeralds and rubies for their beauty, and just as they loved the sight of the tiny rainbow in a sparkling dew drop. As for other things, corn grew so large that a single ear was as much as a man could carry and cotton grew not only white, as we see it now, but red and blue and yellow and scarlet and black and orange and violet and green.

It was the daughter of the Sea-shell King who had taught the people how to grow coloured cotton, and she, with her silky cloud of hair, was the most beautiful creature ever seen. When she walked about, the air was sweet with wonderful perfume, birds sang with joy as though their throats would burst, and slim drooping ferns nodded a welcome.

The story of the beauty and goodness of the maiden ran through all the land, and young men who sought her hand came from far and wide. So many were her suitors that a day was set apart each week, when all the people gathered to see the young men display their powers or their gifts or their clevernesses. Some would shoot with the bow and others cast the lasso. Singers sang the songs they had made and musicians played their flutes so well that the slender boughs bent to listen. There were gifts, too, and some brought rare stones cut into the shapes of birds and animals and flowers, but not one man had touched the heart of the princess, though she was gracious to all.

Now before the king came, an evil creature of a witch had ruled the land, and she had come from the Land of the Shaking Mud. Somehow, the Sea-shell King had driven her away and, that she

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