

THE ENCHANTED LAKE

A Tale From the Folklore of The East

ONCE UPON A TIME, in the long, long ago, there was a king who kept going to war. He conquered his neighbors, then he went to conquer more distant lands, until, finally, he ruled over so many countries and so many people that he was called “The Great Emperor.”

Everyone flattered him. He was given many wonderful gifts. He was told how noble, how great, how very, very wonderful he was, until at last he really believed it! He often said to himself, “No one on earth nor in heaven is greater than I!”

Now this was a pretty strong statement for a mere human being to make, for even the greatest and wisest earthly person cannot know more than everyone else, nor rule over everything on earth and in heaven.

One day this great and mighty Emperor went on a hunting party with his courtiers. They were all gorgeously clothed and mounted on handsome horses that danced and pranced about. The dogs leaped up and barked loudly. The horns sounded, and off through field and forest rode the gay party.

The Sun shone very bright and after a few hours they were all weary with hunting and extremely warm with the heat of the day. Then the great and mighty Emperor told his men to rest under the trees while he went to bathe in a beautiful lake which was near by. The courtiers were frightened because the Emperor was going to bathe in this lake. It was an enchanted lake and one took great risks if even a drop of its magic water touched him.

When told of the dangers of the enchanted lake, the great and mighty Emperor proudly said, “I am

mightier than any enchantment,” and immediately rode to its beautiful sandy shore. His horse was fastened to a tree, his beautiful clothes carefully arranged on the shore. Then at his command his men-in-waiting left him alone. He plunged into the water. He was delighted with its soft coolness. He swam about and was very comfortable. Never for a moment, however, did he forget that he was the great and mighty Emperor. While he was enjoying himself there came to the shores of the lake a man who looked very much like the great and mighty Emperor. In fact, he was almost his double, not only in looks, but also in voice and manner.

This man quickly dressed himself in the Emperor’s clothes. His majesty’s followers were probably sound asleep in the cool shade. Anyway, none of them saw this man, dressed in their Emperor’s clothes, ride away on his beautiful horse. Not even one of those many hunting dogs barked!

Rested, cool, and comfortable, the great and mighty Emperor swam to the place where his clothing had been spread out in gorgeous array. Could he believe his eyes! Why, there were no clothes there! His horse was not there! No clothing! No horse! What an outrage! Someone should suffer severely!

“What, ho! my men!” Not a sound in answer to the call of the great and mighty Emperor!

By this time the Sun was fast disappearing behind the mountains. It grew very cool. The Emperor walked about the shores of the lake. Soon it was dark. He could see no one. Evidently the hunters had gone and left him—left him, the great

and mighty Emperor! Truly, someone should suffer for this! Only wait till he got to his palace and sat upon his throne!

The great and mighty one soon realized that the important thing now was to find clothing and shelter. He suddenly remembered that not far from the lake there lived a knight. “Did I not make him knight and give him his splendid castle? He will be only too glad to clothe his Emperor. I will go to him.”

Before he started to go to the knight the Emperor wove into a mat some of the reeds that grew along the shore of the lake. He wrapped this mat about his body. Then he went to the castle of the knight. Though only a short journey, it was a painful one. The sharp stones cut his feet. The briars pierced his flesh. The branches of the trees caught and tangled his long hair. It was a disagreeable experience for a great and mighty Emperor! Many times he vowed that someone should suffer severely for this when he once more was in his palace and seated upon his throne.

The Emperor arrived at the castle. He beat upon the gates. He called for the gatekeeper who finally came and looked through the little window in the big gate and asked, “Who is there?”

“Open the gate,” ordered the Emperor, “and you will quickly see who I am.” And he swelled with pride.

The gate opened, the minion thrust out his head and said, “Who are you?”

Much disgusted the great and mighty Emperor shouted, “Wretch! I am thy Emperor!”

“Ho! Ho!” laughed the man.

“Wretch! Wretch! Go to thy master,” ordered the Emperor. “Bid him send me clothing. Tell him to come and greet his Emperor!”

“Emperor!” jeered the boor. “The Emperor was here with my master not an hour ago. He came with his court from the hunt. Oh, yes! I’ll call my master. I’ll show him a great and mighty Emperor!” The porter slammed the gate in his majesty’s face. However, he soon returned with the knight and pointing to the naked man cried, “There is the Emperor. Look at his Majesty!”

The proud and mighty ruler said in his proudest and mightiest tones, “Draw near and kneel to your Emperor, Sir Knight! “The knight looked very



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Arthur's Castle

much surprised while the Emperor added, “I—I, the Emperor, made thee knight. I gave thee this castle. I now give thee a greater gift—I grant thee leave to clothe thy Emperor with thy garments!”

“You dog! You rascal! Get out!” shouted Sir Knight. “Know you, you fellow, that not an hour ago the great and mighty Emperor sat at meat at my table.” The knight grew more and more enraged. “Beat this fellow! Drive him from the gates!”

How the gatekeeper laughed as the servants beat the poor man. “Lay on well!” he shouted. “It is not every day you can whack an Emperor.”

The great and mighty Emperor limped away, bruised and bleeding. “Worthless fellow! I gave that knight all he hath. See how he repays me! Wait, ah, wait until I sit upon my throne again! Verily, he shall be severely punished!” Then he began to feel that circumstances were very disagreeable for him. “Now, where shall I go? What next shall I do? Ah! I will go to the Duke! I have known him all my days. With him have I feasted and hunted. Why! the Duke was in my hunting

party today! Surely he will know his Emperor!”

As he stumbled along, the Emperor began to think—to really think. He asked himself why it was his people did not know him. His kingliness, his greatness should be plain to see even if he were not garbed in kingly raiment.

Suddenly there was the sound of a voice, very near, right in his ear! The mighty Ruler was startled. He looked about. He could see no one. Yet a voice had plainly said to him, “True greatness is humble. It proclaims not itself, yet it is like the Sun. It can not be covered up. True greatness gives him who has it great beauty—beauty that no throne, no crown, no kingly raiment can bestow.”

The voice went on: “Wisdom and worth can not be disguised by lack of clothes, nor by dirt and wounds. On the other hand, any foolish fellow with a throne, a crown, a palace and admiring, flattering courtiers can appear to be a prince.”

The great and mighty Emperor plodded on to the Duke’s great hall. But he was not as bold and as sure of welcome as he had been before when he knocked at the gates. At the third knock the gate opened and its porter saw a man clad only in a mat of rushes, his hair a mass of tangles, his body stained and bleeding.

“Go to the Duke, I pray thee. Say to him that the Emperor stands at his gate. Say to him that his Emperor has been robbed of clothing and of his horse. Go quickly! I command thee!”

The amazed porter closed the gate and hastened to his master. “Your Grace, there is a madman at the gates! He is unclad. He is bruised, dirty, wild. He bade me say to your Grace that your Emperor is at the gate.”

The gates flew open. His grace, the Duke, failed to recognize the Emperor!

“Do you know me? I am your Emperor! Only this morning you hunted with me. You will remember that I left you to bathe in the lake. While I was in the lake some wretch stole both my clothing and my horse. And and I—I—I have been beaten by a base knight!” Could it be possible that the voice of the great and mighty Emperor trembled? It certainly sounded less haughty than usual.

“Put the fellow in chains! It is not safe to have such a wretch free,” commanded the Duke, then



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Illumination, 15th century, Chroniques de Hainaut

Arthur's Army and the Romans

added: “Give him bread and water, and straw to lie on.”

“Strange, strange,” murmured the Duke as he returned to his guests in the big hall, and to whom he said, “A madman at the gates. He must have been in the forest this morning while we were resting, for he told me that he himself was the Emperor; that he left us to bathe in the lake and that someone stole both his clothing and his horse. Yet you know that the Emperor rode back with us.”

They all talked about this strange man. Some murmured, “The lake, the enchanted lake!” Yet it did not seem possible that anything could have happened to their Emperor as they had seen him less than an hour ago.

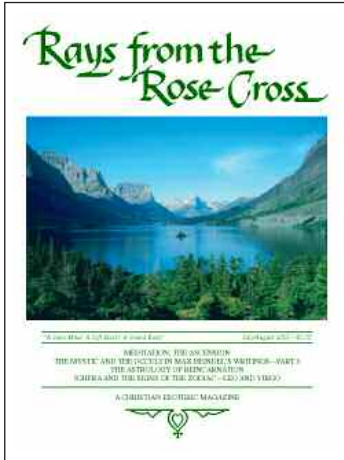
The great Emperor lay chained in a dark cell. He was sore and wounded. “Wait, wait, until I am again upon my throne! I’ll teach those rascals a lesson.” But the mighty Ruler never dreamed that it was he, the great and mighty, who was learning the most wonderful lesson of his life.

“Am I so changed that even the Duke does not know me?” Then his thoughts wandered to the palace. “There is one who will know me, let me

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wear what I may! I will go to her!"

After long, painful effort the chains were loosed and the unhappy man fled from his cell toward his own palace. When morning came he was at the palace gates. The great Ruler lifted his hand and knocked—knocked at his own gates!

The porter looked at the wild, unclad man. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"Let me pass! I am your Master. I am your Emperor!"

"You, my Master! You, the Emperor! Poor fool. Look here." The porter threw open the gates and pointed to a hall. There sat the Emperor on his throne. By his side was the Queen—his beloved Queen! Oh, the agony he suffered!

"Let me go to her! She will know me!"

The noise made by the porter and the Emperor reached the great hall where there was a feast with many guests. The nobles came out to see what the trouble was. Behind them came the Queen and the Emperor.

Choked with rage, with fear and anxiety, when he saw these two he could barely speak; but he hoarsely cried: "I am your lord and husband," stretching out his hand to his beloved Queen. "Surely you know me!"

The Queen shrank back with fear. "Gentlemen," said the man who was with the Queen, "What shall

be done to this wretch?"

"Kill him!" said one. "Beat him!" shouted others.

The great and mighty Ruler was thrust roughly from the palace; each gave him a blow in passing. The gates of his own palace closed upon him. He fled. He knew not where he went. By and by he came to the lake where he had bathed. He was cold, hungry, sore, and bruised; he wished he were dead. He knelt on the ground, he beat his breast. He put his head to the dust and cried, "I am no great and mighty Ruler. I am no wonderful Emperor. Once I thought there was no one greater than I on earth or in heaven. Now I know I am nothing—a poor sinful man. There is no one so poor, so mean as I! God forgive me for my pride."

Tears ran from his eyes. He arose and washed his face in the clear waters of the enchanted lake. He turned around. There were his clothes! There was his beautiful horse eating the sweet, green grass.

His Majesty quickly dressed. He mounted his horse. He rapidly rode to his palace. As he drew near, the gates opened wide. Servants came out, one held his horse, another helped him to dismount. The porter bowed low as he said, "I marvel, your Majesty, that I did not see you pass out through the gates."

The great and mighty Ruler entered. In the magnificent hall he again saw the nobles, the Queen with the man by her side—the man who had called himself the Emperor. The nobles did not look at this man, neither did the Queen. They saw only their Emperor enter the hall and went to greet him. The man also came forward. He was clad in white, shining robes, not in kingly garments.

The Emperor bowed his head to him in the white robes and murmured, "Who art thou?"

"I am thy Guardian Angel," answered he who was clad in shining white. "Thou wert proud and set thyself on high. Therefore thou wast brought low. But thy kingdom, which I have guarded, is now given back to thee, for now thou art humble. Only the humble are fit to rule."

The Angel disappeared. None other had heard his voice. The Emperor once again sat upon his throne, and he ruled humbly, but wisely, ever after. □

—Mary-Abby Proctor