

The True King

By H. F. W. Tatham

Once upon a time there was a man. It was a great many years ago, but it does not much matter when, and in a foreign country, but it does not much matter what. And I have forgotten his real name, but it will be enough if we call him William.

He had a house and a small piece of land, and he tilled it mainly with his own hands, and for a while he maintained himself in comfort. The soil was productive, the seasons were kindly, and he was himself healthy and hard-working. But after a time there came a change.

Drought and rain alternately injured his crops, frost destroyed his fruit-blossom, his trees died, his soil, as he grew poorer and could not afford much help, became foul with weeds. He himself also suffered from ill-health and could not work as hard as he had hitherto. And he was beginning to despair, when one night in spring he had a dream, and this dream repeated itself on the two subsequent nights. After the second repetition he began to think there was something in it; and he resolved to act.

Now the gist of the dream was this. If he dug deep in his garden in a place more or less clearly indicated, he would find a treasure. And here I will say at once that this is not a version of the story of the Farmer and his Sons, who were tricked into digging up all the soil of the vineyard by a false statement about treasure made by their father on his death-bed, and into thereby fertilising the ground. The place, as I have said, was more or less clearly indicated, and the man felt no doubt as to whereabouts he ought to set to work.

So in the morning he began to dig, and he dug and he dug until the sweat stood on his forehead and his hands were sore and his back ached. And just as he was beginning to despair, suddenly his spade came down on something hard with a shock that jarred his arms right up to the shoulders. Roused to new energy, he rapidly shovelled away the earth, and soon revealed to view an iron-bound box. It took him a good deal more time to set this free from the earth in which it was embedded on all sides, but it was done at last, and he dragged the box to the surface. He found it to be small and not very heavy, and felt somewhat disappointed; but it was plainly not very hard to open, and after a little trouble he forced back the lid. What he saw astonished him. There were no ingots or coins, either of gold or silver, no jewels, as he had hoped might be the case seeing how light the box was.

Only a very small man, coiled up and seemingly fast asleep. He had a long grey beard, and his face was lined with innumerable wrinkles. As William looked at him he opened his eyes, yawned, and sat up.

Now you probably think that the little man will proceed to swell to an enormous size, like the genie in the *Arabian Nights*, and threaten to devour William; and that the point of this story lies in the trick by which William persuaded him to get back into the box; but nothing of the kind. The inmate of the box retained his size, and looked at William with a whimsical and, on the whole, a kindly air; and presently getting out of the box, he stretched himself, and sat down on the edge of it, crossing his legs and resting one elbow on his knee and his chin upon his elbow. His eyes twinkled, but he said nothing for some while. As for William, he could do nothing but stare, and made faint gurgling noises in his throat. At last the little man spoke: 'Good-morning, William,' he said. William gurgled something incoherent in reply. The fact of the little man's knowing his name gave the finishing touch to his confusion.

‘What have you been digging for, William?’ went on the creature. William found his tongue at last. ‘Treasure, sir—that is, my lord,’ he managed to stammer out.

‘And you found me, William,’ said the little man, ‘Ha, ha, ha!’ And he laughed a hoarse chuckling laugh. ‘A nice kind of treasure I am, am I not?’ he went on presently.

William had regained his courage by this time, and was able to murmur something about being very glad to see the gentleman, and hoping he was well and did not find the air too strong after being shut up in a box. But the little man suddenly became serious.

‘I think I can do something for you, William,’ said he. ‘You must work hard, and you will prosper fairly well, and, beyond that, you will gain a great reward if you remember to entertain the True King properly when he comes. And now good-night,’ he said abruptly, and he stepped into the box and coiled up. ‘Put me back in the ground’; and in a moment he was asleep. William put the box back in the hole—somehow he never dreamt of disobeying—and shovelled in the earth on the top of it. Then he went back to the house.

Things fell out as the little man had foretold. The seasons proved more kindly, William’s health improved, and as the money came in he could hire labour and improve his land and increase his incomings from it. So two or three years passed away, and William was happy, and had forgotten all about what the little man had said about the coming of the True King.

But one day an unusual event happened. A man dressed like a huntsman came riding up to the cottage and told William to get ready any entertainment he could, as the King had been hunting in the neighbouring forest and, through some error, had become separated from all his train except this one attendant and another, and had been able to obtain no food since the beginning of the chase. William, surprised and gratified, recalled the words of the little man, and busied himself to prepare a table and the best fare he could provide. Presently the King came in sight, riding slowly, accompanied by a second huntsman. He looked tired, and his dress was stained with mud and torn with brambles, but his bearing was unmistakably royal, and his face was kindly and gracious as he looked at William and the preparations made for his entertainment. William was overwhelmed with the honour done him, and exerted himself to the utmost in his endeavours to serve the King. The latter seated himself at the table with his huntsmen, and William waited on him and them with all diligence. Here was the opportunity of his life; here was the chance of earning the great reward.

The table had been spread in the open air, on the green lawn in front of the house. It happened that William on one occasion had to enter the house, to fetch something connected with the meal. On going into the kitchen he heard a faint knocking, and looking towards the back door saw that it was half open, and that an old man was partly standing in the opening, partly leaning against it. He was tapping at the door, and looked at William with an expression of entreaty. He was plainly very hungry and thirsty and weary.

William was a kind-hearted man, but the honour done him by the King had turned his head, and he felt that he could not keep the King waiting for a mere beggar.

‘What do you want?’ he said roughly.

The old man, in a weak voice, begged for food and drink and to be allowed to come in and rest. William threw him a crust and, telling him he could drink from the spring outside, bade him begone from his door, not unkindly, but roughly and shortly. The old man turned to go, and, as he stepped out upon the garden path, the light fell upon his face, and he turned and looked at William. The latter felt a strange feeling at his heart, but at that moment one of the huntsmen called, and William forgot the old man and hurried off.

The meal was ended, the King kindly bade adieu to William and mounted his horse to ride away. Just before he started he lent graciously from his saddle and bade William come to his palace on the morrow and he should be rewarded for his loyalty and hospitality. William bowed low, in a whirl of gratitude and excitement, and when he raised his head the King was gone.

On the morrow William, on his stout grey horse and in his best clothes, rode into the town. When he came in at the gate he noticed something strange. People stood at the street corners whispering in low voices; business seemed at a standstill; there was no noise in the whole great city. William felt his heart sink, but he somehow dared not ask any one a question, and rode on till he came to the palace gate.

There he asked the warder for audience of the King. But the man looked at him in a surprised manner, and asked him if he had not heard the news? William said he had not. 'Why, have you not heard,' the man went on, 'that the King was seized with illness on his return from the hunt yesterday, and lies at the point of death? And is this a time for such as you to ask an audience of him? Every moment we expect to hear that he is dead.' And almost as he said the words the great bell in the castle-tower clanged out once, and was still. William and the warder stared upon each other for a full minute; and then the great bell clanged out once more. 'God rest his soul,' said the warder; 'he is dead.' And William, without a word, turned round and rode away to his house.

His hopes had died. The King could have left no word; his successor, a cousin with whom he was on ill terms, would not have carried out his wishes if he had. William was in deep dejection, and bitterly cursed the little man and his promise, that had raised his hopes so high only to disappoint them. He sat gloomily till evening, when he went to bed, and after tossing about for some time fell at last asleep. And as he slept he had a dream, as perhaps you have expected that he would have.

He was in a great open place, very bright and radiant, with a floor like glass, and people ranged round in countless thousands. At one end of the space there was a great throne, all white and glistening, and a man that sat upon it. But William, try as he would, could not make out the man's face. Something seemed to dazzle him; but he could see that he was in royal robes, and had a crown upon his head. At that moment, at the other end of the space, William saw a man advancing between the rows of spectators.

The figure thus seen was tall and dignified, and as it came nearer William recognised the face of the King who had received his hospitality two days before. But he was dressed in a plain white linen robe reaching to the feet, and in his whole air there was a look as though for the first time he realised that he was but a man as other men were, and knew that his kingship gave him no rights here beyond those of others, even the humblest. He went up to the steps of the great white throne, and there halted with bowed head as one about to receive sentence. And when William glanced up from the standing figure and looked once more upon the face of Him that sat on the throne, he saw that it was the face of the beggar-man who had come to his cottage door—transfigured and irradiated, it is true, but still the same face. And with that a darkness came over his eyes and he saw no more; and in another moment he was awake.

How, after that, he lived and prospered moderately we need not relate; nor how he dug again in his garden, and found no box and received no further promises. And sometimes he thought the whole thing was a dream and a delusion; and sometimes again he felt that the events of those days had been the only real part of his life, and that he had thrown away a chance that he could never have again. But he lived uprightly and did his duty till his life's end, and served his King, though he had not been worthy to entertain him. And that was good if, perhaps, only the second best.

