

❖ THE GUIDE ❖

FROM THE COLLECTED STORIES OF THE GOLDEN CASTLE

BY FR. JOHN JULIAN OJN

I had traveled for long, long years in my search for the Golden Castle and there had been no rewards for my journeying, no suggestions that might be nearing my goal, no hints that I had ever even been on the right road. One evening — so tired that I could hardly stand — I found a large spreading tree in a roadside meadow, and fell exhausted under its branches, ready to give up the life-long quest for the Castle.

I suppose it was a dream, but it seemed I had slept for a long, long time when I heard a voice. There was no light, no sign of anyone — only the voice. And I heard the words: "Faithfulness will be rewarded — I am sending you a guide." And suddenly I was awake. It was full morning in the meadow, the sun was at the edge of the sky, the birds were singing and there was a soft breeze that moved the grasses where I lay. I sat up and rubbed my eyes — and there before me sat a large and beautiful dog, his brown eyes watching me intently, his tongue lolling and his tail wagging. He looked like a Golden Retriever, but his coat was more like true gold. As I got to my feet, he came towards me, touched my hand with his nose, and then walked a few yards off and sat expectantly, as though waiting for me. "I am sending you a guide. . . ," the voice had said. And this dog — was he the guide?

My spirits lifted immediately, and as soon as I had a hurried breakfast from my wallet, and a drink from a nearby brook, I turned to the dog. Instantly he was on his feet — leading the way. I shrugged my shoulders, smiled, and followed, feeling more hope than I had felt for a long time.

That morning was the first of many as the dog and I became inseparable partners. He was gentle, tolerant, understanding of my weaknesses. He never pushed me when I was tired, but was always available, always ready to lead when I was ready to travel. He and I crossed great tracts of land, climbed mountains, forded rivers. He never left and he never seemed to tire. I shared my food with him, and on cold nights he shared his warmth with me. When we were threatened by wild animals or by bandits, he became my protector and never quailed before an attacker, no matter how large or frightening. He collected scars in those battles, and I did my best to care for his wounds until they were healed.

The dog walked with me through difficult terrain and dreadful weather, and never left my side through the most fearful storms. But always he seemed to know where he was going, and I was only too happy to be in the presence of at least some semblance of certainty. We traveled on through all the seasons, over all the lands, and we had been companion for several years when the day came that he ran ahead of me out of the deep forest in which we had been traveling for a week, and bounded up a rise in the path. As I caught up with him, I saw the cause for his joy, for on the top of the next hill stood the glory that was the Golden Castle. The dog bounded around me, exploding with joy, sensing that he had finished his task, and had brought me to the place that I would go.

The next day we reached the gate of the Castle. It rose high above my head. The dog sat down next to the gate, as I pulled the golden chain and heard a bell ring far off in the recesses of the Castle. Before long, the great gate swung slowly aside, and an old man in a white gown with a golden cord about his waist stepped out before me.

"Welcome to the Golden Castle," he said. "Those who set out for this place are many, but those who find it are few!"

"Well, I couldn't have done it myself," I confessed, "if it hadn't been for my dog." And the dog wagged his tail and panted happily.

"Please come in," said the old man. I slipped the strap of my wallet over my shoulder and patted my thigh. "Come along, friend," I said to the dog, "We finally made it."

"Oh, I am sorry," interrupted the old man, "the dog cannot come into the Castle. It is not his place. Only you may enter. You must leave the dog here."

"But I can't leave him here," I pleaded. "He is responsible for my getting here at all. Not only has he led me on the right way, but he has defended me and protected me and warmed me when I was cold. It's impossible that I should leave him here."

"I'm sorry," the old man shook his head, "he may not enter."

I was smitten! How could I leave this faithful servant behind? How could I go into happiness and fulfillment and leave him out here in the cold? I looked down at the dog. He returned my look with the same loving eyes and he wagged his tail. I saw the tatters in his once-beautiful coat and the scars of his battles on my behalf. I thought of the days and the night when he was the only friend I had. I remembered the joy of our first morning together. It seemed impossible that I could ever part from him.

"Well," I had a thought, "I can leave him here and come to visit him several times a day, and bring him food and water and perhaps even make a shelter for him."

"I'm sorry," the old man replied, "once you pass through these gates you will never leave them again — even to care for someone you love."

I didn't know what to do. Here was the Golden Castle that I had sought for my whole life. I knew it was my destiny to be here, but now I was faced with a terrible dilemma. Should I forsake the life-long dream and stay here with the dog? Or should I leave him and go on to what I knew was meant for me? I looked up at the soaring towers. I looked down at the dog. And I knew what I had to do.

I stepped over to the dog, opened my wallet and placed all my food there on the ground. I put my arms around him, and held him as he licked my face. Then I stood. "Good-bye," I said, "You have brought me along the right way. You have done your duty, but I must now go on alone. Good-bye." and I turned towards the gate.

"You have definitely made up your mind?" asked the old man.

"Yes," I answered, with tears on my cheeks. "Yes, I will leave my guide here." and as I turned to look one last time at my protector and friend, the old man uttered a musical laugh and clapped his hands.

At the sound of the clap, as I stood watching through tear-streaked eyes, suddenly a cloud of golden smoke enveloped the dog. A hundred bells began to ring from the towers of the Castle, and I am sure I heard the song of many voices. As I blinked and looked again, standing where the dog had been was a shining young man dressed in white robes. Light shone from his very skin, and he was laughing and singing all at the same time. The air itself seemed to dance and shimmer with joy.

I stood there stunned until the bright man came forward and, placing his hands on my shoulders, he kissed me on the cheek. "We are all so happy for you," he said in a musical voice like chimes.

"But. . .but. . .," I stammered, "are you my dog?"

"Oh, yes," the bright young man sang to me, "I am your guide. The Masters sent me to bring you here — if you really wished to come. And now that you have understood that I am only a guide, and not a god, I am freed to be my full self."

"Yes, but," I asked shakily, "what would have happened if I had refused to leave you?"

"Then," said the young man, "I would probably have turned into stone like any other idol, and would have been no good to anyone. But now I can be with you."

"You see," the old man said lovingly, "this is the last and the hardest of the tests, and it calls for the deepest commitment and the deepest understanding that one can want nothing more than the Golden Castle itself – even something that is very good — even something that has been essential in the course of one's journey here. Finally, the Golden Castle must be all in all. Come in, now, to the greatest of welcomes."

I picked up my fallen wallet from the road, looked at it for a moment and then flung it far out into the field. As the three of us entered the Golden Castle arm in arm, the young man smiled and winked at our elderly companion and added, "You know, I once had a dog, too."