

❖ THE GOLDEN ONES ❖

FROM THE COLLECTED STORIES OF THE GOLDEN CASTLE

BY FR. JOHN JULIAN OJN

"Oh, good Father," I said to the old man with the golden skin and the long white beard whom I met on the road, "surely you have been to the Golden Castle, for the skin of your hands and your face is golden, and I have heard that that is true of those who have lived in the Golden Castle."

"Yes," he smiled warmly, "I have lived in the Golden Castle."

"Please, Father, I have longed to live in the Golden Castle. Can you tell me what I must do to go there?"

"It is very simple, my son," said the old man. "There are three things you must do: first, you must leave behind all that you own; secondly, you must leave behind those whom you love; and, thirdly, you must do a noble feat of great courage—and then you may live in the Golden Castle."

"Father," said I, "I am ready now: today I shall gladly leave my belongings and my loved ones if you will show me the noble feat of great courage which I must do."

The old man looked at me deeply and silently for a long time. Then he said, "Follow me!" and he turned down the road. I ran to obey, and we walked many, many miles that day. Just at twilight, we came to a small cottage in a wide meadow.

"I must go on now," said the old man, "but you must stay here for the time being." He opened the door of the cottage. "Here," he said, "you will find shovels and hoes and rakes, and there in the corner are bags of seed. You are to dig a garden here in the meadow—as large a garden as you can make—and you are to plant the seeds and tend the plants until I come again. Then I will show you the noble task of great courage you must do in order to live in the Golden Castle." And in a moment he was gone.

The next day I began the garden. I spaded it and broke up the clods and laid out the rows and planted the seeds. Day after day I watered the plants and weeded the garden. After many months, autumn came, and I harvested the garden. There was much more than I could possibly use, and since my mentor had given no instructions, I carried the extra produce into the village and gave it to the poor.

Winter came without the return of the old man, and I spent the winter months making plans for the garden in the spring. When the time came, I again dug the garden—a little larger this time, for I was now familiar with

gardening—and I planted it. The autumn came, and the old man had not returned, so I harvested again, and gave most of the harvest to the village poor.

The golden-skinned old man passed my gate early the next spring and I ran to him to tell him I had followed his instructions, and hoped it would be time for him to give me the noble feat of great courage to do so I could go to the Golden Castle. He merely nodded approvingly as he looked at the enlarged garden plot, and said he would return.

The fourth year after I had come to live in the cottage, two young men came along the road, and when they saw me tilling the garden, they called out in astonishment and ran to me. "Good Father," they cried, "you must have been to the Golden Castle, for the skin of your face and hands is golden." I looked with surprise at my hands, and saw to my amazement that they were indeed golden, colored by the sun that had beaten upon me as I worked in the garden. "Father," said the young men, "will you tell us how to be worthy to live in the Golden Castle, too?"

"Well," said I, "I can only tell you what I have been told: you must leave all your belongings, and your loved ones, and you must do a noble feat of great courage."

"We are ready; we are ready!" they cried, "We will leave our belongings and our loved ones this moment if you will tell us what noble feat of great courage we must do."

"For now," I replied, "come and join me. We will live in the cottage and dig the garden even larger, and the day will come when we will all be told the noble feat of courage we must do."

And so the young men joined me, and in a few years their skin had turned golden in the garden like mine. And now the garden produced such a harvest that when we gave it away, there were no more hungry people for miles around.

The years went by, and each year brought more men and women who came to join us on our farm. And the garden grew in size until it filled the whole meadow. Of course, the cottage became too crowded soon, so we added some rooms to it, and as the numbers of our people increased, we added a second, and then a third, and even a fourth storey to the house, so we would not spread so wide that we used up garden space for our dwelling. Many of my young friends were now as golden-skinned as I, and more and more people came from the towns and the villages to join us.

And each month now, at the time of the new moon, the old man in a white beard and golden skin can be seen coming down the road and through the gate to our farm. He and I sit for long hours over tea, and the

young people say that our warm laughter can be heard throughout the house. They also tease me that my own white beard will soon be as long as my friend's.

And the people of the village say that each day at sunset, when they look from their homes off towards our farm in the eastern meadow, they can see the towers of our great house all bright in the rays of the setting sun. One child, who is particularly dear to us, told her parents that our great house at sunset looks just like a castle made of gold.