

❖ THE COLOR OF THE SOUL ❖

FROM THE COLLECTED STORIES OF THE GOLDEN CASTLE

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No matter to whom one spoke about the Golden Castle, it soon became apparent that in order to enter the Castle, one had to be pure and holy and undefiled. Many people said many things about the Golden Castle, some praising it, some ridiculing it, and some even disbelieving in it and calling it merely a legend, but everyone in the village agreed that if there were a Golden Castle, it only allowed entrance to those who were truly pure.

I remember a friend of the family who used to sit at a table in our inn with a tankard into the long nights, talking with my father. When I was just a child one night I overheard this man telling about his life-long desire to go to the Golden Castle, and how he had prepared for the trip three times but each time just as he was ready to set out, he would do some wrong or commit some evil which would stain his soul, and he knew he would be refused entrance because of that, and so he had never undertaken the trip. My father would cluck sympathetically and they would change the subject. Even though the tap room was forbidden to me, I heard that story many times over when I was a boy, creeping in each time this man visited, and hiding behind a great butt in a dark corner.

It seemed that I had thought of that trip and tried to prepare for it since as early as I can remember. I was certainly the best-behaved boy in the village, because I was trying very hard to be pure until I was old enough to travel to the Golden Castle.

One day when I was nineteen, an old man stopped at the inn. He was jolly and warm and open, and his skin was a deep golden color. That evening, my mother (who served as barmaid in the tap room and was sympathetic to my obsession with the Golden Castle) came knocking at my door. "Hurry," she whispered, "come quick! That stranger who came today is from the Golden Castle itself, and he says he will take anyone there who wishes to go!"

I threw on my clothes and dashed to the tavern. "Ah, here comes my lily-white son!" laughed my father, "He wants very much to go to the Golden Castle, and he thinks he has kept himself pure enough to get in! The old man pushed back his stool and stood. He looked at me silently for

a long time. I felt foolish under his piercing gaze, and I sat down awkwardly at the table.

"Well, perhaps!" the old man said quietly. "Just perhaps! Might I speak with your son in private?"

"Aye," said my father, "Come, Bessie, we'll to bed. Lad, show our gues to his room when you've finished."

No sooner had my parents left than the old man rummaged in the great bag he carried on his shoulder and brought out a perfect globe o crystal. He sat at the table opposite me and buffed the globe on his sleeve "Do you *truly* want to go to the Golden Castle more than anything else? he asked.

"Truly," I swore, "more than anything else."

"Here then, lad, take this globe on the palm of your hand, and when say the word, you will see a picture of your soul in the globe. If you see black, that will represent pride on your soul. Red will be for anger, green represents envy, yellow means lust, blue is avarice, orange is gluttony and brown indicates sloth. In order to enter the Golden Castle, your soul must be whole and golden. Do you understand?"

I nodded fearfully, and accepted the globe on my shaking palm. The old man peered into the globe and muttered a word in a language I did not know. At first the ball grew cloudy, and then slowly it cleared, and at its very center was a slowly turning perfect sphere, and it was smeared and splashed and splattered with every terrible color of the rainbow. All those colors the old man had mentioned were there, and others he had not even named. The appearance was gaudy and bawdy and horrible, and the sphere just continued revolving and showing to the old man and to me all the dreadful garish things on my soul. I was smitten and horrified, and cried out and fell to the floor and remembered no more of that night.

I woke the next morning to the sounds of my mother in my bedroom. As I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, I saw her folding my hose and a fresh tunic and packing them in my bag. On the table was a piece of cheese wrapped in a cloth, and a stoppered flask of beer. "What's happening?" asked sleepily.

"I'm packing your things for the trip," she said.

"What trip?" I asked, barely awake.

"Why, the trip to the Golden Castle," she replied in a matter-of-fact way. "The old stranger said you would be going with him today."

I couldn't believe my ears. Both the old man and I had seen the evidence the night before. We had both seen the myriads of sins and evils on my soul. There was no purity to be seen there, no golden color at all on

my soul. I wasn't fit for the Castle, no matter how hard I had tried or for how long a time.

But my mother was right! After I had broken my fast, the old man came to the door, and said, "Are you ready?" Dumbfounded, I grabbed up my packet, kissed my parents a quick farewell, and followed the old man out to the road.

We walked for a long time. At first I asked a lot of questions: "How could I go to the Golden Castle when my soul was so bad?" "Hadn't he seen what I had seen in the crystal globe?" "Wasn't I already disqualified?" "Why bother to travel to the Castle when I would never be allowed to enter and would probably spend the rest of my days in sorrow?" To each of the myriad of questions, the old man only replied with an almost unintelligible "Hmmmmmm". Finally I gave up the interrogation, and walked silently next to his own golden-browed silence.

We traveled a long way, and finally came to the beautiful gates of the glorious Golden Castle. At a word from my companion, the gate swung open, and the gatekeeper stepped out—golden-skinned like the old man—and embraced him with great affection. "Here," the old man said to the gatekeeper, "He has come, as I said he would." The gatekeeper smiled and embraced me, also.

"But," I remonstrated, "I am not worthy. My soul is not pure and golden. I cannot enter the Castle."

"Oh, I see," said the gatekeeper and winked at the old man. "Perhaps we can do something about that."

Beyond the gate, there was a wide-spreading garden of great beauty. The gatekeeper led me to a dancing fountain in the midst of the garden just within the gate. He took me by the hand, and in his other hand held the old man's magic globe. "Take the globe again, my boy," he said, and felt its cold smoothness once more on my palm. I looked into it, and saw again the horrible, smearing dance of dreadful color that was my sinful soul, and I felt sick.

"Would you like to be rid of all those colors?" asked the gatekeeper.

"Oh, yes sire!" I stammered.

"Then step in here," and he indicated the fountain.

I was beyond arguing then, so I did as I was told. The two men stood watching and smiling.

For a moment or two the water of the fountain blinded my eyes, but when I regained my sight, I saw that something was happening to the sphere in the crystal. It was spinning faster and faster, and as I watched it splashes of color flew away from the sphere, washing off in a bright water

that swirled every which way. I was astounded, for as the colors weakened and vanished, I saw beneath them a smooth, whole, perfect sphere spinning in the center of the globe, untarnished by any color other than its own deep, rich gold.

"How can this be?" I cried out as I leaped from the fountain to show the vision in the globe to the old man. "It is whole and perfect and pure gold. Look!"

"Of course," said the old man laughing. "Do you think I would have brought you all this way only to send you back? My son, listen to me: the people are right when they say that purity is necessary to enter the Castle. But they do not understand that while the pure golden sphere of the soul may be covered up and smeared about and painted over with every terrible color, if one truly longs for purity as you did, the *shape* of the sphere is not destroyed. When evil truly rules a soul—and that happens much more rarely than most people think—the perfect roundness of the soul is scarred and chipped and twisted and disfigured. When I looked into the globe with you that first time, I did not look for colors, for I *knew* beforehand that they would be there—they always are; I only looked to see if the soul were still the perfect and flawless sphere which the Maker intended it to be. That is all that matters: that the Maker's work has not been undone. All the rest—as you have seen—can be disposed of easily."

I shook my head, "Then there must be many who could come to the Golden Castle if they wished to do so and if they knew of this!"

"Oh, yes," said the old man, "perhaps even most people—if they truly wished it, as you did!"

And the two golden men put their arms around my dripping shoulders and, laughing at my astonishment, led me toward the great door. As we passed through the doorway, I looked up and saw that the archway over the portal was surmounted by a single, beautiful, perfect golden sphere.