

The Wicked Prince

Hans Christian Andersen

Once upon a time there was a proud and wicked prince who thought only about how he might conquer all the nations of the earth and make his name a terror to all mankind. He plunged forth with fire and sword; his soldiers trampled down the grain in the fields, and put the torch to the peasant's cottage so that the red flames licked the very leaves from the trees, and the fruit hung roasted from black and charred limbs. Many a poor mother caught up her naked baby and tried to hide behind the smoking walls, but the soldiers followed her, and if they found her and the child, then began their devilish pleasure. Evil spirits could do no worse, but the Prince rejoiced in it all.

Day by day his power increased; his name was feared by all, and fortune followed him in all his deeds. From the conquered cities he carried away gold and precious treasures, until he had amassed in his capital riches such as were unequalled in any other place. Then he built superb palaces and temples and arches, and whoever saw his magnificence said, "What a great Prince!" Never did they think of the misery he had brought upon other lands; never did they listen to the groans and lamentations from cities laid waste by fire.

The Prince gazed upon his gold, looked at his superb buildings, and thought like the crowd, "What a great Prince!" "But I must have more, much more! There is no power that can equal-much less surpass-mine!" And so he warred with his neighbors until all were defeated. The conquered kings were chained to his chariot with chains of gold when he drove through the streets; and when he sat at table they lay at the feet of the Prince and his courtiers, eating such scraps as might be thrown to them.

Now the Prince had his own statue set up in the market places and the palaces; yes, he would even have set it in the churches, on the altars, but to this the priests said, "Prince, you are great, but God is greater! We dare not obey your orders!"

"Well," said the evil Prince, "then I shall conquer God too!" In the pride and folly of his heart he had built a splendidly constructed ship in which he could sail through the air. It was as colorful as a peacock's tail, and seemed decorated with a thousand eyes, but each eye was the barrel of a cannon. The Prince could sit in the center of the ship and, upon his touching a certain button, a thousand bullets would stream forth, and the guns would at once be reloaded. Hundreds of strong eagles were harnessed to the ship, and so it flew away, up and up toward the sun.

Far beneath lay the earth. At first its mountains and forests appeared like a plowed field, with a tuft of green peeping out here and there from the sod; then it seemed like an unrolled map, and finally it was wholly hidden in mists and clouds, as the eagles flew higher and higher.

Then God sent forth a single one of His countless angels, and immediately the Prince let fly a thousand bullets at him, but they fell back like hail from the angel's shining wings. Then one drop of blood-just one-fell from one of the angel's white wing feathers onto the ship of the Prince. There it burned itself into it, and its weight of a thousand hundredweights of lead hurled the ship back down with terrible speed to the earth. The mighty wings of the eagles were broken, the winds roared about the head of the Prince, and the clouds on every side, sprung from the smoke of burned cities, formed themselves into menacing shapes. Some were like mile-long crabs stretching out their huge claws toward him; others were like tumbling boulders or fire-breathing dragons. The Prince lay half dead in his ship, until it was finally caught in the tangled branches of a dense forest.

"I *will* conquer God!" he said. "I have sworn it; my will shall be done!" Then for seven years he built other magnificent ships in which to sail through the air, and had lightning beams

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forged from the hardest of steels, to batter down the battlements of heaven itself. From all the conquered countries he assembled vast armies which, when formed in battle array, covered mile after mile of ground.

They embarked in the magnificent ships, but as the Prince approached his own, God sent forth a swarm of gnats-just one little swarm-which buzzed about the Prince, and stung his face and hands. In rage he drew his sword, but he could cut only the empty air; he could not strike the gnats. Then he ordered that he be brought costly cloths, which were to be wrapped around him so that no gnat could reach him with its sting. His orders were carried out; but one little gnat had concealed itself in the innermost covering, and now it crept into the Prince's ear and stung him. It smarted like fire, and the poison rushed into his brain; he tore the clothes loose and flung them far away from him, rent his garments into rags, and danced naked before the rugged and savage soldiers. Now they could only mock at the mad Prince who had started out to conquer God and had been himself conquered by a single little gnat!

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