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THE SAINT AND THE SERPENT

In far-off times there lived a boy. His name was Golden-Heart. He was a fine looking lad, blue-eyed, fair-haired.

One day, he noticed something strange lying on the ground outside his father's house. "It looks like a huge rope, in coils, and yet ...?" questioned he, and came a little nearer. It moved slightly. Golden-Heart called to his parents to come and look too. "Why," they whispered, for fear of waking it, "it's a serpent, albeit a fine one. Who would have thought of such a creature landing here! "Ah," continued the boy's father and mother, "today is All Hallow's E'en, when anything might happen, and anything might appear." "What," asked Golden-Heart, "does 'hallow' mean?" "It means what is revered, made holy. It is the eve before All Saints Day, the day of all saintly people." "O," murmured the boy. While talking the little family had withdrawn into the house, but now when they looked out of the window, the great Serpent had gone. "Stay in, dear child," pleaded his parents; "before the Day of Saints comes the night of dark deeds." But outside it was a golden late October afternoon. Every leaf shone in its glow; Golden-Heart wondered where that snaky creature had taken itself. He slipped out of the simple wooden cottage, ran swiftly along the woodland path leading to the foothills of the mountains. There he saw a strange sight. Rearing up from a



large flat slab of grey stone, like a vast pillar of burnished copper and glowing orange as flames of fire, something stretched upwards to the sky, beyond the trees Golden-Heart had just left behind him, higher than the hills, almost to the mountains themselves. Suddenly, a mighty voice out of the clouds spoke: "Go back to earth." The shining pillar-like object immediately grew shorter, reddish-purple in colour. To the boy's fascinated and awed gaze, it seemed to grow broader and rounder until, greenish coil upon

coil settled one upon another and to Golden-Heart's amazement there lay what he had sought - the Serpent! A large drop of water splashed over the edge of the slab of rock filling to overflowing the deep chalice of a half-opened autumn crocus. "Are you in trouble?" asked Golden-Heart. "Yes-.-.-.-" sighed the great creature, and the soft hiss of his voice

echoed on in the hills, long after he had spoken. Anyone else might have been filled with fear, but the boy was interested more than anything else. He thought the Snake looked really magnificent, lying there, his scaly skin shining silver in the last rays of the evening sun.

"I wish I knew something," sighed the boy. "What is it?" asked the Serpent. "Are there two kinds of knowing? about what I can see and about what I cannot see? How do I love what I cannot behold? I want to find the answer to this question." "And mine is," slowly replied the creature, "when shall I be allowed to reach the heavenly heights?" Neither could answer the other's question. At length, the Serpent said, "Of all nights this is the one in which to receive answers about the future." "From whom?" queried the boy. "From the Saintly Hermit." "Where does he live?" "In an awkward, very awkward place to reach." "O, can we try?" cried Golden-Heart. The Serpent was so long answering that he thought he was never going to speak. Finally he said, "Yes, we will both go to the Saintly Hermit with our questions. But, why are you not afraid of me? Most people are." "Why should I be?" promptly replied the boy; you belong to God's earth as much as I do. Besides, you look beautiful, especially your fiery red ruby eyes." "There will be dangers and difficulties," warned the creature. "I trust in you," answered Golden-Heart simply. "But, I will run home and tell my parents what I am going to do." He found his parents just leaving home to look for him, so that, when he said he was about to be off again, they were rather dismayed. But they had long become accustomed to their son's fearless and purposeful nature. All they said was, "We will watch for your safe return." They trusted in the helpful spirits around their son.

Off set Golden-Heart to where he had left the Serpent. He was full of excited anticipation. They set off together, his great companion grumbling, "The dark spirits will be a nuisance tonight and may obstruct our path. Still, they don't particularly like me, but they might be impertinent to you, Boy. Keep close, always, to me." Now, a mist fell, so that they could scarcely see their path; fortunately the snake's eyes shone like lamps. Every now and again, black shapes swept across their way, or flew around them as if they would hold them prisoner. Once, Golden-Heart seemed to be almost carried off his feet, to the accompaniment of harsh, piercing yells. Suddenly, a stillness descended, for it was late, nearing mid-night. All Saints Day was approaching. The fog lifted, the moon shone in all her brilliance. "Now comes the most difficult part of our journey," remarked the Serpent. "Why," asked Golden-Heart. "There is an abyss, a chasm, to cross. The Saintly Hermit lives in his cell the other side of it." The creature let out a prolonged breath, sounding like a thousand sighs. On all sides, great boulders of rock loomed

in the moonlight, assuming strange shapes. It was called The Pass of the Giants. Golden-Heart felt very small, as he walked through this place. Higher still, the mountains reared their peaks to the night sky. Presently, the boulders lessened. The way widened and suddenly the two travellers stood almost on the edge of a great, wide, deep gorge. Even the Serpent recoiled slightly. "Look!" exclaimed the boy, "I see a faint light on the other side." "Yes," replied the creature, "it glimmers from the Saintly Hermit's cell; no ordinary light though: it is the holy light that surrounds such men. Let us rest a little." Each was glad to remain still for a short while. Golden-Heart's gaze took in the wideness of the abyss. "How can we possibly cross?" "I will



be the bridge, on which you shall cross." "Ah, dear Serpent, how wonderfully strong and kind you are!" "Before I do this," spoke the great creature, "may I ask you a favour?" "O, yes," quickly replied the boy. "Please, I want to change my name. One letter will do it. I have always admired so much the mountain eagle poised for flight, with his wings making a great 'V'. Place it in the middle of my name, instead of 'P', and I will become ..." "'SERVENTE', which means servant," cried Golden-Heart. "Now," said Servente, "my task begins." With these words he gathered himself together to cast his length across the chasm, but, he only reached halfway. With his strong muscles he pulled himself back. The next time, rearing vertically, he made a mighty effort to reach the other