

# The Seven-Banded and Seven-Locked Steel Box.



A FAIRY TALE  
FOR CHILDREN.

BY CHARLES SMITH CHELTNAM.

**T**WO men could hardly carry it—for the reasons that they were very small men and the box they were bearing was very heavy. It was a steel box, bound with seven strong bands of steel, and locked with seven strong steel locks, which not even the most skilful locksmith in the world could have picked or in any way opened without using the seven golden keys belonging to them. Nobody could see it without feeling a burning desire to know what it contained and all about it—to whom it belonged, where the two little men had brought it from, where they were taking it, and why, of all places in the world, they had brought it to the middle of a desert, across which there was no pathway, seeming to have come from nowhere and to be on the way to nowhere else.

The rate of progress of the two little box-bearers grew less and less as they grew more and more tired, and at last they put down their burden and seated themselves, one at either end of it, to rest themselves, one looking in one direction, the other towards the opposite side of the desert, which appeared to be boundless.

They were twin brothers, and nobody, from their looks, could have guessed their age. Somehow, they conveyed the idea that they could never have had a father or mother, but had been made by some modeller who,

after shaping their feet and legs of the natural size, had found himself to be running short of materials. They were, now that they were full grown, about 4ft. in height. Their legs were half as long again as their bodies, which, with their arms, might have been imagined to have reached only half their natural development. Their heads were only a little larger than those of rabbits, to which they bore some resemblance, the ears excepted; for each had only a single ear, one having his on the right, the other his on the left side of his head; and it was the same with their eyes. As to their complexion, it is impossible to say exactly what it was, for it seemed to change with the state of their feelings—chameleon-like—being at one instant green, at another yellow, or grey, or black. Their names were Zbrill and Zbroll.

"One, two, three—this the spot must be!" said Zbrill.

"Four, five, six—here the sand grains mix!" said Zbroll.

"Twenty yellow, twenty red!" said Zbrill.

"Just as our good mistress said!" said Zbroll.

"Here she comes!" said Zbrill, looking across the desert with all the power of his one eye, which must have been very great indeed, for, except to him, nothing moving was to be seen there.

"No, that is not our mistress's footfall!"

said Zbroll, listening intently with his one ear.

Zbroll was right; it was not their mistress, the good Fairy Melusina, who was approaching them.

Presently the transparent air seemed to open, and, as if coming from an invisible door in it, a young and wonderfully beautiful woman, dressed in dazzlingly splendid clothes, came straight towards them, but stopped a few paces off.

"My poor little men, are you not very lonely, sitting there?" asked this radiant personage, who was a wicked fairy, in spite of her wonderful beauty and the tone of kindness in which she spoke.

"No, we are never lonely," replied Zbrill.

"Because we are always together," explained Zbroll.

"But at this desert spot you are far away from everywhere—are you not hungry and thirsty?"

As she spoke neither of the little men saw how she did it—she held out to them a golden salver on which there was a pile of

good enough to last us for the rest of our lives," added Zbroll.

The fairy threw away her golden salver, with its tempting fruit and wine, all of which vanished into the sand of the desert at her feet.

"Are you fond of beautiful jewels?" she asked. "See! I have brought you each a diamond ring of inestimable worth! Come to me and let me put them on your fingers."

"Complete your kindness by coming to us," said Zbrill.

"If we even thought of moving from our seats on this steel box it would spring upon us and crush us!" said Zbroll.

"Dolts!" cried the wicked fairy, enraged by the failure of her plans to draw the little men away from their charge, which was all she needed to enable her to get possession of it for the magician Bhagon, whose commands she was compelled to obey.

"We can't help being what we are," said Zbrill.

"We did not make ourselves, you know," added Zbroll.

The defeated fairy turned the sand at her feet with so much rage as to send it up in a cloud so dense and high that, when it settled down, it buried the two little guardians of the steel box up to their waists and hid the box itself from view. When they dared to open their eyes again the fairy was gone.

"You know who *she* was, don't you?" Zbrill asked his brother.

"Oh, yes!" answered Zbroll. "She is one of Bhagon's slaves, and would willingly change her beauty for our ugliness to get out of his power."

Suddenly, as they were speaking, the daylight changed

to the darkish hue of night, and all about the little twin brothers the sand hissed as with the voices of a million angry serpents or the passage of a furious hurricane; but the air remained as still as if it had been struck motionless.

luscious-looking fruit and a flagon of sparkling wine—deadly to whoever partook of either.

"No; we are neither of us hungry or thirsty," said Zbrill.

"We had a good meal before starting—



"SHE HELD OUT TO THEM A GOLDEN SALVER."

"Sit firm upon your end of the box!" cried Zbrill.

"I know that it is Bhagon, trying to frighten us away," said Zbroll; "but he will have his labour for his pains, great magician as he may be."

Then the two found themselves surrounded by flames from which spurted terrific flashes of lightning towards them, and the ear of each was nearly deafened by crashing peals of thunder following one another incessantly.

"You are not afraid, are you, brother Zbroll," asked Zbrill.

"Not in the least," replied Zbroll.

In a moment the thunder and lightning ceased, and the whole of the atmosphere became as it were made of glittering particles of light, and—removed from them only by an interval of a few yards—the brave little guardians of the steel box beheld a monster of the dragon kind crawling towards them with wide-open jaws—jaws wide open enough to take in both of them, with the box they were sitting upon, at a snap.

"Do you tremble, pigmies?" roared the dragon-like monster.

"Our good mistress has deprived us of that infirmity," replied the little brothers.

"Call to her to come to your aid, that I may have but one mouthful to make of her and you!" cried the monster, clashing his jaws together.

"She comes when she likes," replied Zbrill.

"We never need call her," added Zbroll.

"If you will get off that box I will not hurt either of you," said the monster, in the most amiable tone of voice he could assume.

"We couldn't if we wished to," said Zbrill.

"What do you mean? Don't attempt to jest with me!" roared the monster.

"We are not jesting at all; we are glued to the box," said Zbrill.

"If you doubt it come and try to pull us off," said Zbroll.

The angry monster sprang forward a little way and then fell back, writhing like a wounded serpent in the agonies of death, uttering a screech that seemed to find ten thousand echoes in the desert. And then it vanished from the sight of the brave little men as completely as if it had melted into the invisible air surrounding them.

And now I am going to tell you how it was that Zbrill and Zbroll came to be guarding the box in the middle of the desert.

A thousand leagues away Bhagon, the

great magician, who had sent the dragon which had been just foiled in his endeavours to drive the guardians of the steel box from their charge, was raging in his necromantic chamber. He was the sworn servant of King Malicon, who was the sworn enemy of Gracinda, one of the best as she was the youngest and most beautiful Queen on earth, because she would not consent to be his wife, holding him and his ways in utterest aversion.

No bad man ever made a good King, and Malicon was a bad Prince before ascending the throne of his father. That his people had not the least love for him was natural. The revenues of the State were used by him simply to minister to his pleasures. But little by little these revenues fell away, and his treasury could no longer be replenished, even though the hardest means were employed by him to wring taxes from his subjects. It was in this strait that he turned his eyes on Gracinda, whose kingdom was widely known to be one of the most prosperous on earth, its well-being and happiness being certain so long as it remained in possession of an amulet or charm of wondrous power, which was kept in a steel box, deposited in an adamant chamber built in the foundation of the Royal palace, and guarded every minute of the day and night by a hundred officers, the bravest in the Queen's army.

Before his misdeeds had brought him so low King Malicon could have gathered an army together and overrun the kingdom of Queen Gracinda, and compelled her to hand over to him the amulet which would transfer her prosperity to him; but he could no longer count on the assistance of his army, which had ceased to trust him. His last resource, he saw, was to seek the aid of the magician Bhagon, who, he knew, would be ready and willing to do anything in his power to injure Queen Gracinda, who had banished him from her kingdom on account of his ill-doings.

The power of this magician was terrible. There was hardly any act of wickedness that he was not able to accomplish. He had even subjected several fairies to his mischievous will, and he took delight in the exercise of his evil skill. Therefore he at once fell in with the King's wishes to deprive Queen Gracinda of her amulet the moment they were made known to him, though he did not disguise from himself that the task was one of the most difficult he had ever undertaken, because the young Queen was

protected by a fairy whose power he had already vainly tried to overcome.

Had he known, or even suspected, that this good fairy regarded with alarm the extent of his evil powers he would have thrilled with delight. It was not on her own account, but on that of the young Queen over whom she watched affectionately, that she was afraid of what Bhagon might do; and her fears were greatly increased when she found that he was engaged by King Malicon to get possession of the Queen's amulet for him. She had herself made the adamant safe in which it was secured; but she was haunted by a dread lest she might have overlooked some essential to its perfect security, and that this oversight might have been discovered by Bhagon: for, if that were so, she knew that he would be sure to find means to overcome the watchfulness of the hundred officers devoted to the guardianship of the treasure.

It was needless to alarm the Queen by revealing to her the danger; so she determined to act alone and to remove the amulet to a spot in the centre of a desert which she imagined was known only to herself, confiding its custody to two of her heart-and-soul devoted servants, Zbrill and Zbroll, whom she had found in the depths of a forest when they were newly-born infants, whose parents, terrified by the strange shape of their offspring, had put them out of sight. But she had not succeeded in eluding the watchfulness of Bhagon, and it was only the extreme power of the charm which she had cast about her two faithful little servants that had prevented him from carrying off the amulet in triumph.

Every hour King Malicon sent to him impatient messages, demanding to know what he was doing and how long it would be

before he delivered the amulet. Bhagon put him off with as many excuses as he could invent; but at last the King's impatience would no longer brook restraint, and he ordered the magician to be haled before him.

"You call yourself a great magician!" he cried; "but I begin to believe that you are nothing better than a contemptible impostor!"

"Your Majesty is unjust," said Bhagon,



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"YOU ARE NOTHING BETTER THAN A  
CONTUMPTIBLE IMPOSTOR."

"as you would recognise if I could reveal to you the stupendousness of the difficulties I am overcoming in your service.

Before I can lay hands on the amulet I have promised to secure for your Majesty I have got to overpower a fairy who has hardly her equal!"

"But you have told me that you have half-a-dozen to pit against her!"

"As yet I have not been able to bring their united strength to bear upon her."

"Do it, then, or—take good heed of what I now tell you—magician, or no magician, if you fail to bring me that amulet before the sun goes down to-day, I'll have your head!"

Bhagon felt strongly inclined to retort, "I

can a thousand times more easily have yours, if it were of any use to me," but he said nothing, and only bowed his way out of the angry King's presence.

When he got back to his home he found someone awaiting him in the darkest corner of his necromantic laboratory, where, keen as his eyes were, he could not make out the form of his visitor.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"Your obedient fairy servant, Azaeth," a voice answered, which he at once recognised as that of the beautiful agent he had sent to tempt Zbrill and Zbroll to betray their fealty to their mistress.

"Why are you hiding yourself?" he asked, suspiciously.

"So that, in consenting to do as I advise you, you may not think you are being biased by the sight of my beauty."

"What would you have me do? You know that I have not a moment to spare from devising means for keeping the King from becoming desperate."

"The means I would help you to is to get possession of the box with the amulet it contains," said the voice.

"Why did you fail?" demanded the magician.

"The power of Melusina was too great for me to overcome; no one besides yourself is powerful enough to get the better of it. Now, after your failure, she thinks you will make no further attempt, and that gives you your best opportunity for triumphing over her."

"Your suggestion is a good one!" cried the magician.

"Act upon it, then, without a moment's delay," cried the voice. "The two poor little wretches who guard the treasure are weary with watching, and will not be able to resist your power for an instant."

"My beautiful Azaeth!" cried the magician, exultingly, "if your words turn out to be true I will give you your freedom the moment I set hands on that precious box—which, perhaps, I shall not make over to King Malicon after all."

"You know the exact spot in the desert whither Melusina has had it carried?"

"I could find it in the dark if need be; it is just where the sand grains mix—twenty yellow and twenty red!"

"How I shall triumph over Melusina!" cried the voice out of the dark corner of the laboratory, following the words with a silvery laugh.

With an eagerness only known to malicious magicians Bhagon snatched up his wand,

the prime source of his necromantic powers, and rushed from the room—seemed to vanish from it, indeed, so swiftly was his departure; and the thousand leagues that lay between him and the spot in the desert to which he was bound were passed over at a speed no less. It was midnight when he arrived there.

"Are you awake?" asked Zbrill of his brother, whom he could not see at the end of the steel box.

"Wide awake," replied Zbroll.

"This heap of sand about us makes nice warm bedclothes——"

"And follows every movement you make without needing to be pulled!"

"I wonder whether we shall care for them much when we each get the extra eye and ear our mistress has promised us for taking care of this box?" mused Zbrill.

"Oh, she would not have promised them to us if she hadn't been quite sure that we should like them," said Zbroll.

"She *is* a good mistress," said Zbrill.

"I don't believe there's a better," said Zbroll.

"And I don't believe any mistress could have two better servants!" said a voice that seemed to come from the lips of a person seated on the box between them; though, when they each put out a hand to feel for the speaker, only their own two hands came together.

"Hush!" said the voice, which now seemed to have sunk into the heap of sand in which they were half buried.

The next moment they felt themselves nearly knocked off the box by the contact of somebody who had, apparently, rushed upon them out of the darkness full tilt, without being able to stop himself in his headlong course. The two little men could not see what had happened, but it seemed to them that, whoever the person was, the force of his concussion with the steel box and themselves had served to hurl him back several yards and prostrate him painfully on the sand, for they could hear him groaning.

"Fiends! Where has my wand flown out of my hand?" he cried. "If Melusina were not a thousand leagues away I should again fail in my errand!"

"Then your failure is perfectly assured!" answered a voice in the air directly over his head; "for Melusina is not only here, but holds you powerless by the magic of your own wand!"

At that moment the sky, which had been as dark as it ever can be at midnight, be-

came lit with the rays of a myriad of stars, and in the silver light with which they filled the atmosphere Bhagon beheld his conqueror, resplendent in the joy of her triumph, while like a maimed reptile he lay at her mercy helplessly.

"Be merciful!" he gasped.

"It is my purpose to be so," replied Melusina; "merciful to all who are or who would be in danger from your wickedness, if I did not for ever end your power to injure them."

As she spoke she drew a line on the sand about his body with the point of the magic wand she held in her hand, and when the circle was completed the sand within the space it marked sank down, down, bearing the magician with it to the middle of the earth, while the sand from the edges of the gulf dashed grains by grains, twenty yellow and twenty red—following him, until nothing was left to mark his grave but a shallow hollow, which the first passing wind would obliterate.

Before the sun's rays fell upon the marble front of Queen Gracinda's palace the good fairy had restored the steel box with its precious contents to its adamantine place of security, so that the peace and prosperity of the Queen and her subjects were never for a moment checked in their happy course.

As for King Malicon, after passing a sleepless night, as soon as the first signs of dawn were visible he sent for Bhagon; but nobody at the magician's house knew what had become of him, nor did anybody ever afterwards know—excepting the good fairy Melusina and her trustworthy little servants, to whom she restored whatever of

form and good looks Nature had for some inscrutable reason withheld from them.

When the news of Bhagon's unaccountable disappearance was communicated to King Malicon he fairly screamed with rage, and at last, in his fury, he dashed his head against the wall with so much force that he fractured his skull and killed himself on the spot: an ending of his evil career which not one of his subjects—even amongst those who had passed for being his friends—pretended to regard as a national misfortune.

His throne passed to one of his nephews whom he had never seen, the young Prince Ernestus having been carefully reared and educated far from his uncle's disreputable Court. The people entered upon a new life, and in the course of a few years forgot, in the enjoyment of peace and growing prosperity, the bad experiences through which they had gone in the past. And a greater good was yet in store for them.

Between the Court of Queen Gracinda and that of King Ernestus an intimacy had speedily come about, for the young King was soon found to be everything that was estimable and desirable as

a neighbour and something more by Queen Gracinda; and when it became known that she had consented to give her hand to him the joy of the peoples over whom they ruled was great beyond expression.

On their wedding day, and as a solemn conclusion to the magnificent ceremonial which accompanied it, the steel box with its seven strong steel bands, and locked with its seven strong steel locks, was borne in the



"THE SAND WITHIN THE SPACE MARKED SANK DOWN."

midst of a splendid procession—headed by the fairy Melusina, whose train was borne by Zbrill and Zbroll, to whom she had given all the advantages of natural form

Not a sound escaped from the lips of any one of the countless thousands of onlookers, and every syllable of the words spoken by the venerable High Chancellor reached the



"THE PROCESSION."

and good looks denied to them at their birth—composed of all the representative orders in the kingdom, canopied by a cloud of gorgeous banners and passing through a music-laden air.

On the procession reaching the cathedral where the Royal pair had been married the box was carried to the upper step of the grand entrance and placed upon a carpet of cloth-of-gold. And then the Queen's High Chamberlain produced from a golden casket, adorned with priceless jewels, seven golden keys, and with these undid the seven strong steel locks, while the cathedral organ made the sunlight that fell on all without vibrate with heavenly music.

farthest limits of the assemblage as he said:—

"In the name of our beloved Queen and of her beloved people!"

That said, he unlocked the steel box and raised the lid, and from the inside took a velvet-covered casket and opened it, displaying to the joyful multitude three linked golden hearts, each having on its side a word, traced in diamonds of dazzling brilliancy.

And the three words were: "Justice—Kindness — Energy" — forming together Queen Gracinda's amulet—the guide and protector of her reign, and the source of her people's prosperity and happiness.