

Bevis of Hampton

Bevis was the son of the Earl and Countess of Hampton. The Earl was a good man and loved his little son dearly, but the Countess was a very, very wicked woman and hated both her husband and child. When Bevis was only seven years old, she killed her husband and sold the little boy in slavery to the captain of a ship from Heathenness, a distant country. Then she married Sir Murdour, brother of the Emperor of Germany, and let him rule over the land.

When the captain of the ship saw what a strong, fair boy young Bevis was, he made up his mind to make a little money by selling him to the King of Heathenness. The King was pleased with the slave boy's beauty and cleverness and bought him for a page and cupbearer.

The King's wife was dead, but he had a pretty little daughter named Josian. Josian and Bevis became the greatest of friends, even though Josian was a princess and Bevis only a slave boy. Indeed, some of the knights of Heathenness were very jealous because their King and his daughter were so kind to a boy who was a slave from a foreign land.

One day as the boy was out riding with sixty of the knights, one of them mocked him and jeered at him because he whose father was an earl with many servants to wait upon him now had to be a slave.

"Sirs, I was sold into slavery when I was only seven years old, and you know well that it was through no fault of mine," said Bevis angrily. "If I were a knight and were armed as you are, I should soon make you sorry for your jeers."

"Hear the impudence of the slave!" cried the knight. "He must not go unpunished for it. Let's prick him with our swords."

So all the sixty knights rode at Bevis and gave him many little wounds with their swords. Bevis was wild with pain and anger. He wrenched a sword from the hand of one of the knights and killed them all. Everyone at the castle was much surprised to see sixty riderless horses come galloping back to the stable. Bevis followed home slowly and went to his room. His wounds were so bad that he fell to the floor and lay without moving.

When the King heard that Bevis had killed sixty of his knights, he was furiously angry. He ordered his men to seize Bevis and put him to death at once. When Josian heard these orders, she fell weeping and sobbing at her father's feet and begged him to have mercy upon her friend.

The King loved his daughter dearly and did not wish to have Bevis killed before her very eyes, but he thought that the boy was too dangerous to be left alive.

So he said, "I will be merciful and give the boy a chance to fight for his life. As you know, in the Great Forest there is a terrible wild boar which has eaten so many men that woodsmen no longer dare to go alone in the forest, but always go in companies of twelve. Bevis must fight this wild boar alone. If he can bring me the boar's head, I will forgive him and make him a knight." He said this because he thought that Bevis would surely be killed. But Josian was glad, for she loved Bevis with all her heart and thought that he was strong enough to slay the worst monster in the world. At once she took a large bundle of healing herbs and went to dress Bevis's wounds.

Bevis was very grateful to her for saving his life and caring for his wounds. He loved her just as much as she loved him. Indeed, who could help loving such a pretty little maiden with bright black eyes and dusky hair?

As soon as Bevis's wounds were healed, he made ready to go to fight the wild boar. Before he set out, Josian secretly gave him two wonderful gifts: Morglay, a magic sword that could never be broken, and Arundel, a horse with the heart of a lion and the speed of the wind.

Then Bevis went to the Great Forest. As he knew that he would have to fight on foot, he tied Arundel to a tree at the edge of the woods. He went on alone, blowing his horn every few minutes to rouse the boar, but the boar was sleepy and took no notice of him. He went on his way through the woods, blowing his horn and searching every thicket, but still he could not find the boar. At last he came to a narrow winding path, white with the bones of the men the boar had eaten, and soon he reached the round, dark entrance to a little cave.

There he stood and shouted, "Come out, you foul beast. You must fight with me."

When the boar heard his voice, it came out.

As soon as it saw Bevis, it gave a loud snort and all its bristles stood on end. It looked as if it would swallow Bevis then and there. Bevis struck the beast with his strong hunting spear, but its hide was so tough that the spear broke at the very first blow. The boar rushed on grunting horribly.

Bevis had to dodge quickly, for its tusks were so long and sharp that they could bite through any armor. He drew his magic sword, Morglay, and struck the boar again and again. The sword could not break, but it did not cut the boar any more than it would have cut a piece of marble.

He fought and fought and fought until he was so tired that it seemed as if he must give up the fight and be eaten by the boar.

But all this time the boar had been growing angrier and more tired. Its little bloodshot eyes were almost blind with rage, and it was so out of breath that it was nearly choking. At last, when it was panting so hard that it could not close its mouth, Bevis ran his sword down its throat and killed it. Then he cut off the head, placed it upon the end of his spear, and started homeward. When he arrived at court with the boar's head, the king was much surprised and not very glad, but he kept his promise and made Bevis a knight.

At this time, the King of Heathenness was at war with King Bradmond of Damascus. Sir Bevis, with his warhorse Arundel and his sword Morglay, did so many brave deeds that he was made leader of the army. Then, in a great battle, he conquered Bradmond's army and made that King flee for his life back to his own land. When Bevis returned in triumph to Heathenness, he was the hero of the land. All the people loved and feared him as much as they did their own King. The King himself was so grateful that he planned to marry Josian to Bevis and make Bevis heir to his kingdom.

"I love you dearly and should like to see you my son," he said to Bevis. "You shall marry Josian and rule over this land after my death.

But first you must promise to stay in this land forever and give up all hope of seeing your own country again, for it would never do to have a man whose heart was in a foreign land as ruler over my people."

"Sir, I love Josian with all my heart, but I can not give up my native land even for her," replied Bevis. Then the King was very angry and sent Bevis off to his quarters. Not long after, Josian went and told him that she loved him enough to marry him and flee from the country with him. Bevis was very happy. At once, the lovers began to make plans. A servant was outside with his ear to the keyhole. He ran and told the King every word they had said. Now the King was accustomed to have his own way in everything. When he found that Bevis was planning to marry his daughter and take her from his land, he was furious. He wished to get rid of Bevis, but he did not dare to kill him openly because the people loved him. At last he had an idea.

He wrote a note to Bradmond, the king he had just conquered, saying, "If you wish me to be merciful to you, take the messenger who brings this note and never let me see him again." Then he sealed the letter with double seals.

He sent for Bevis and greeted him kindly. "Pray take this letter for me to King Bradmond. It contains a message of the greatest importance. It must reach him safely and it must be kept secret. Swear as you are a true knight that you will not unseal it on the way.

"Of course, I'll not unseal it," replied Bevis readily, "and I'll carry it safely, for who can stop me if I am mounted on Arundel and carry Morglay by my side?"

"You must leave Arundel and Morglay at home," said the King. "You are to be a messenger, and it is a rule of all countries that no messenger must ever be harmed. It will look strange if you go armed as a warrior.

Bevis was surprised that the King did not wish him to take his favorite horse and sword, but he obeyed. He set forth on a slow palfrey and carried only a common sword. At length he came to Damascus, the city of King Bradmond.

King Bradmond was the richest man in the world. There was never a castle more splendid than his. The walls of both towers and halls were plated with gold, and the windows were of diamond, and the doors and pillars of brass. Around the castle was a dyke, and over the dyke was a bridge. Beneath the bridge hung sixty bells, which all rang merrily every time a man or

beast went across. A tower of gold stood at the end of the bridge, and on the top of this tower was a golden eagle with eyes of jewels so bright that they cast a light over the whole castle. Bevis made his way into the court, dropped on one knee before the King, and delivered the letter.

King Bradmond ordered the clerk¹ to read the letter. When he heard it, he was very glad and so were all the people. They wished to have revenge upon the enemy who had killed so many of their knights in the war. The King held a council and ordered that Bevis be seized and thrown into a deep dungeon where there were two dragons. These dragons ate every man who came within their reach.

All the men rushed upon Bevis to seize and bind him. He fought bravely until his sword broke in his hand. At last he was taken. His hands were tied behind him so tightly that the blood burst from his fingers. Then he was led into the hall and fed by one of Bradmond's knights.

"Eat with good appetite," jeered King Bradmond, "for this is the last food you will ever taste. Your King was very generous to give you into my hands after you had been my most dangerous enemy in the war."

That was the most cruel mockery of all, for Bevis was hurt by the treachery and ingratitude of the King of Heathenness. When the meal was over, his hands were unbound and he was lowered into the dungeon by a rope. All the servants stood above to watch him meet the dragons bare-handed. The dragons crawled forward, roaring and snorting. Bevis drew back away from them until at last he was crowded against the cold, slimy wall. Then his foot struck something round and hard on the floor. It was an old wooden club. With this as his only weapon, he fought against the dragons. The horrible battle lasted a whole day and night, but in the end Bevis won.

All those who were watching were astonished to see Bevis kill the dragons. He had fought so bravely that they left him alive in the dungeon and lowered some wheat-bran and water to him every day. But his only meat was the flesh of the rats and mice he caught in the dungeon. In this way he lived for seven years.

During this time, another rich king, Inor of Morbraunt, had come to the King of Heathenness to seek the hand of Josian in marriage.

The King consented to the marriage. As the months had gone by and Bevis had not returned, Josian had become wild with anxiety. Even though her father had told her that Bevis had run away and gone back to England, she still loved him and did not wish to marry any other man. She wept and pleaded, but she was forced to marry Inor. The King even gave Inor Bevis's good sword Morglay and his good steed Arundel. After the marriage, Inor and Josian set out for Morbraunt.

Now Inor rode his own horse until he came to the gates of Morbraunt. Then he thought he would like to enter the city in triumph upon the beautiful Arundel. As soon as Inor mounted, Arundel knew that he was a stranger. The horse was lonesome for his master and was very angry that anyone else should dare to ride him. Instead of going into the city, Arundel dashed off into the forest. He twisted and turned through brush and briar so that Inor was torn and scratched.

At last he gave a mighty leap that threw Inor to the ground and broke his back. When Arundel was caught, he was chained to the stable by seven chains. The grooms blamed him for killing the King and would have starved him to death if Josian herself had not carried him a little corn every day. After the death of Inor, Josian stayed in the land as queen, but all power was in the hands of Sir Grassy, the steward.

At the end of seven years, Bevis began to give up hope and think that he could never escape from the dungeon. One day as he was praying, the jailers thought that his voice sounded weak.

"Ah! He is losing his strength," they said.

"Let us go down and kill him. Then we shall not have to bother to feed him every day."

So they let themselves down into the dungeon by a rope and attacked Bevis. The first struck at Bevis with his sword, but Bevis slew him with a blow of his fist. He was not so weak as they thought. Then he took the first jailer's sword.

It was not long before he had killed the second jailer also. Seizing the rope by which the jailers

had come down, he easily climbed out of the dungeon.

Although it was not yet dawn, grooms were already bustling about the stables. King Bradmond planned a hunt that day and wanted to have the horses saddled early. As Bevis crept along the outer wall of the stable, he looked through a crack and saw a pile of armor. He burst through the door and went in. He was ghastly white from his long imprisonment and his hair had grown so long that it touched the ground. When the grooms caught sight of him, they all ran away crying that they had seen a ghost. Bevis quickly armed himself and took a horse. Then he rode to the drawbridge and ordered the porter to let it down.

“And be quick about it,” he said, “for Sir Bevis has escaped from the dungeon and I must catch him.”

The porter thought that Bevis was really one of the king’s knights sent to capture the escaped prisoner, and let him out. Bevis spurred his horse onward and galloped off into the forest.

He hunted for the road out of the kingdom, but the forest paths were many and winding. He rode on and on, but still he did not reach the end of the forest. When it was almost night, he saw a city in the distance through the trees.

Coming nearer, he saw that he was back at Damascus. He had been riding in circles all day. He rode away until he was so tired that he could keep awake no longer. Then he alighted and slept in a thicket. In the morning early, he arose and set out again. This time he found the right way.

Meanwhile King Bradmond missed his jailers and soon discovered that Bevis was gone. He ordered all his knights to arm themselves and start out to search for Bevis. One of the knights had a marvelous horse. He rode far ahead of the King and the other knights and soon caught up with Bevis.

Sir Bevis turned and killed this knight with the first thrust of his spear. Then he mounted the knight’s wonderful horse and fled along. But before he had gone far, he lost his way again. King Bradmond and the knights circled around him and drove him down to the sea. There poor Bevis was trapped. Before him was the great ocean; behind him was such a large band of

knights that he could never fight his way through them.

In despair, he spurred the horse into the water. The noble animal swam on and on day and night until he reached the opposite shore.

When the horse reached the land, he started to shake himself dry. Bevis was so weak and tired and hungry that he fell to the ground and the horse ran off without him. Bevis went on foot, begging his living from house to house. Soon he learned from a minstrel that Josian had not long ago married Inor of Morbraunt and was now ruling in that country with Sir Grassy, the steward.

So he turned his steps toward Morbraunt. On the way, he exchanged garments with a pilgrim so that no one would recognize him.

When he had come into the city, he found a large company of pilgrims at the castle gate waiting for dinner. Josian gave food to all who needed it, and was especially kind to men from distant lands. As it was not yet dinner time, Bevis went around to look at the city and the outside of the castle. As he was passing under a tower, he heard his own name spoken in a well-known voice. He looked up and saw Josian at the window, praying for his safety, as she had prayed every day for seven years. Then he knew that she had not forgotten him and still loved him.

He came back to the gate again just as all the other pilgrims were going into the great hall. When Josian came into the hall, she noticed that he was a new pilgrim, but she did not recognize him. She made him sit near her and asked him many questions of the countries he had seen. At last, she asked him if he had heard anything of a knight named Bevis.

“Do I know Bevis? Indeed, I am his dearest friend. This Bevis once owned a wonderful horse named Arundel. He has often wished to know what became of this steed and has sent me into many lands in search of him. Have you by any chance heard of Arundel?” he asked, for he wished to know whether Arundel still lived.

“He is in my stable. Come and see him,” replied Josian. She and Bevis went out to the stable together. Even then she did not recognize Bevis because he had changed much in seven years. But as soon as the faithful horse heard his

master's voice, he broke all the seven chains by which he was tied to the stall and came running out of the stable door.

"Oh! Now he has escaped and will run wild through the streets of the town," cried Josian. "Then when men catch him, they will kill him." Bevis laughed and jumped to the horse's back. Arundel quieted down at once under his master's touch. Then Josian knew that the pilgrim was Bevis, for Arundel would let no other man ride him.

"Ah! Bevis, now that I have found you, pray do not ride away from me," she cried in fear, as Arundel galloped around. "Take me with you."

"Of course I'll take you with me," said Bevis, "but I can not go now anyway. I must have some armor first."

"And we can not go away openly," whispered Josian in great terror. "Sir Grassy, the steward, is a wicked and powerful man. He will arouse the people so that they will never let their Queen go. He wishes to rule the land and have all power himself. He has frightened me so that I do not dare to do anything. Everything is in his hands.

He will never let me marry you, for he fears a new king who might take his power from him, and he will never let me leave the land for fear some other noble may be chosen king. We must steal away secretly. Tonight at supper I will put a sleeping powder in his drink."

So that night she gave Sir Grassy a sleeping powder. Then when he was sleeping soundly, she took his keys and went to the treasury. There she chose the best armor she could find and the sword, Morglay, which had been lying idle since King Inor's death. Bevis armed himself quickly and rode forth with Josian on the back of the noble Arundel.

They rode all that night and all the next day without being caught by anyone from Morbraunt. The next night they spent in a cave in the woods.

They had not gone far the following morning when they met a giant, the largest and most terrible ever seen. He was thirty feet tall and had bristles like a pig. His brows were a foot apart and his eyes were as big and hollow as saucers.

His mouth was wide and his lips were thick and hung apart.

He carried a young oak for a staff. Bevis asked the horrid monster to give his name and his business.

"My name is Ascapard," said the giant. "Sir Grassy sent me to kill you and bring the Queen home again."

Then the giant attacked Bevis and there was a great battle. Sir Bevis was so quick to dodge that the giant could never even touch him, but he struck the giant many times and covered him with wounds from head to foot. At last, when the giant was weak from loss of blood, he lay down and begged for mercy. Josian also asked Bevis to spare the giant's life.

"This most terrible monster has given himself into your hands," said she. "If you spare his life and make him your page, he may be very useful to you later on."

So Bevis spared Ascapard's life and took him along on the flight. The giant was very grateful to Bevis and tried to help him in every way he could. Soon they reached the sea and found a merchant ship ready to sail for Cologne. Bevis and his companions wished to take passage, but the ship was already full of knights who would not let them come aboard.

"We have none too much room for ourselves," they said, "and besides, that giant is so ugly that it would make us sick to have to look at him for more than two minutes."

When Ascapard heard what the knights were saying about him, he was very angry. He waded out to the ship and threw them all overboard. Then he returned to shore, picked up Arundel with Bevis and Josian on his back, tucked all three under one arm, and carried them out to the boat. They all set sail and in a few days landed at Cologne.

First of all, Bevis wished to borrow some knights from the Bishop of Cologne and go to win back Hampton from his wicked mother and his stepfather so that he and Josian might have a home of their own. The Bishop of Cologne welcomed him and was very kind to him, but he would not offer to lend him any knights.

“Alas!” he said, “this land has sore need of all its knights, for here lives the most terrible dragon in the world. It is one of the twin serpents of Calabria. The pair completely destroyed that unfortunate country. At last, they were driven forth by the prayers of a holy man. One flew to Rome and was turned to stone by a great magician. The other came here and has been harming us ever since. No knight can even scratch him, but he has killed hundreds of them by the poison that he spouts out. I fear that if I should send any knights out of the land, this dragon would become even bolder than he already is.” Now as Sir Bevis had conquered many horrible creatures, the wild boar in the Great Forest, the two dragons in the dungeon, and the giant Ascapard, he thought that this dragon of Cologne could not really be so bad as the bishop had said. But one day as he was going toward the forest with Ascapard to hunt deer, he heard deep groans from a thicket by the roadside. There he found a poor knight all swollen and purple.

“Oh!” cried Bevis, “how did you come by such sores? What has hurt you? How can I help you?”

“Alas!” gasped the knight. “I have been touched by the dragon’s poison. No one can help me. It takes years to cure the pain caused by one drop of the poison.”

“I will go at once and conquer the dragon,” said Bevis boldly.

“And I, too. When that dragon catches sight of me, he will fall dead with fear,” cried Ascapard, wagging his huge head.

So Bevis and Ascapard went on into the forest. They had not gone far when they heard such a noise as had never met their ears before, a howling and a roaring and a hissing. No sooner had Ascapard heard this noise than he trembled with fear and ran away. Bevis kept on. He soon came to a little clearing at one end of which was a small pool of water glistening with strange violet lights. In the middle of the clearing, a slimy, scaly dragon was coiling and uncoiling itself and lashing about in a fury.

Bevis rushed forward and struck the dragon with his good sword, Morglay. The sword slid off the dragon’s scales without making a scratch. Then the dragon gave a hideous yell and struck Bevis to the ground with its tail, breaking one of the

knight’s ribs. He arose and smote the dragon again and again, but with no effect. The dragon kept wounding Bevis with its terrible tail.

As Bevis backed farther and farther away to avoid the poisonous breath of the dragon, he reached the edge of the pool and fell over into the water. At once, all his wounds were healed and he felt as fresh and strong as if he had just awaked from a night’s sleep. Then he knew that the pool was a magic one.

He climbed out and attacked the dragon with renewed strength, but the dragon spouted a gallon of poison on him and he fell senseless to the ground. The dragon kept on lashing him with its tail until it whipped him into the magic pool. In a moment, Bevis became well again. When he came out of the pool, he struck the dragon with as much strength as he had had in the beginning of the fight. But the dragon was now tired and started to crawl away. Bevis followed and sliced off five feet of the wicked tail that had given him such painful bruises. After that, he had little trouble in cutting off the dragon’s head.

He put the head on the point of Morglay and went back to Cologne in triumph. All the people hailed him as the savior of their country. The good Bishop promised him all the knights he needed to help him win back Hampton. So Bevis left Josian in the care of Ascapard and, taking a hundred of the bravest knights in the land, set sail for Hampton.

As soon as he landed, he sent a challenge to Sir Murdour, his stepfather, ordering him to give up Hampton to its rightful heir. But Sir Murdour would not give up his riches without a fight. Moreover, Bevis’ mother urged him on to battle, for she feared and hated her son. So Sir Murdour had a great army of knights sent from Germany.

Meanwhile, Sir Bevis found many brave knights to help him among the old friends of his father, knights who had always hated the wicked Countess and her second husband.

There was a great battle. Sir Murdour rode a white horse and could be easily seen from any part of the field, but as he always kept in the midst of his army, he was not easy to catch. Many knights were slain before Bevis finally singled him out of the mass and killed him. As soon as their leader was gone, the German knights began to flee. The wicked Countess was

watching the battle from the castle tower. When she saw that her husband was slain and the battle was lost, she jumped from the tower and was killed. Thus Bevis gained his land.

After the victory, all the people came to Bevis in great joy and hailed him as their lord. As soon as he could, he sent a messenger to Cologne to bring Josian and Ascapard. Then Josian and Bevis were married amid the rejoicing of all the land and ruled happily over Hampton the rest of their lives.

¹ The word clerk in olden times meant scholar. Often a clerk was the only man in court who could read and write.