

The Golden Barge

The children were at their lessons when a badger interrupted them. "A barge, a barge," he wheezed breathlessly before collapsing in a pile. The children all held their breath and looked at the teacher. He knew there was nothing that could hold their attention if a barge passed overhead and grimacing he nodded a curt yes. The stampede was joyous and raucous as the students poured out the door, each child carefully avoiding stepping on the poor badger. Except for the evil spirited Cass who gave it a swift boot as he passed. The teacher pursed his lips making a mental note to have a long chat with Cass before gently picking up the badger and carrying him to a place of rest and safety.

The stampede carried the children down the path to the main Vale and each one boasted that they would get the prize. If a prize was dropped that is. They craned their necks, sought higher vantage points and squinted to the west. Little Tam Eagle-eyes, true to his name squeaked his news first, "The barge, the barge! It comes." He pointed at a speck that was getting larger. Uniforms were shed and knapsacks dropped. Everyone stripped down to their underwear to make racing all the quicker. The older boys catcalled the older girls until Hetty Longshanks, 16 and almost done



with lessons punched Jeremiah Evensong in the neck. He dropped and the boys piped down. Everyone took their marks.

Closer and closer the great golden barge came, strange music emanating from it. A flock of birds and faeries flew around it being careful not to get too close so as to set off the defenses. Oddly dressed or completely undressed people stared over the sides and a few sat on trapezes suspended underneath. When they saw the children they raised a great cheer and began to toss sweetmeats down. The older, cannier children ignored the sticky treats and started running. The younger children, knowing themselves too slow to run with the pack were content to claim a sweet or two. They trailed slowly behind the pack collecting the candies the older children ignored.

Despite its apparent lack of speed it was an effort to keep up with the barge. As it flew along more and more children dropped out of the race until only the oldest or most determined remained. The beings on the barge called encouragement in their strange tongue or tongues. Among the oldest ran evil spirited Cass and Hetty Longshanks. Keeping up with them through spirit alone was twice handsome Percy who Cass and his friends called Pretty Boy and

mercilessly teased when adults were around and pinched and slapped when the adults were not present. He ran with intense determination on his face and Hetty managed to keep Cass away until she stumbled and almost fell. Seeing his chance Cass moved to knock Percy down when suddenly a badger sprang up and twisting between his legs tripped him so he fell to the ground!

Feeling his energy almost gone Percy was relieved when he saw the tiny parachute drop from the bow of the barge. It floated to the ground and Percy grabbed it before it hit the ground. The beings on the barge yelled their approval and Percy collapsed in a heap wheezing and panting. He saw the barge headed east before it twinkled and disappeared. He was slowly recovering his breath when the sun was shadowed. Cass loomed over him, "Give me that. I would have had it if that badger hadn't tripped me." All Percy could do was shake his head no, too spent to speak. "Well then I'll just have to take it!" He would have too if he hadn't been attacked almost simultaneously from two sides. On one side he was assaulted by Hetty Longshanks and on the other he was assaulted by an angry badger. One he may have been able to handle but not both. Later even his friends speculated that the badger would have been easier to handle than Hetty. Badgers are mean but Hetty was a very dirty fighter with zero respect for the tender parts of a young male.

Cass cried uncle and stumbled away in disgrace. Hetty helped Percy to his feet and dusted him off. She was covered in blood, none of which proved to be hers. She slapped Percy on the back, "Good run!" They both solemnly thanked the badger who nodded in return and then they all headed home Percy clutching his hard earned prize in his fist.

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