

The Pedlar of Swaffham, *Tales of Wisdom and Wonder*, Hugh Lupton

Once upon a time there lived a man called John Chapman. He was a pedlar by trade, and he tramped the streets, lanes and roads; he tramped the highways and the by-ways of England, selling pins and mirrors, ribbons and reels of thread, knives and scissors, pills and ointments and ballad sheets. And wherever he went, he would take his little dog with him, running at his heels.

Now, John Chapman and his dog lived in a little cottage on the edge of the town of Swaffham. A tiny cottage it was, and half open to the weather. In the spring the birds would be in and out of the broken windows, nesting in the rafters above his bed.

But he did have one little bit of luck. There was a tiny garden at the back of the cottage, and in that garden there was an apple tree, a beautiful old russet apple tree, and every autumn it would drop its fruit on to the grass – the sweetest apples in Swaffham.

Well, one night John Chapman was fast asleep in his bed when he heard a voice. He heard a lovely voice, as clear as moonlight, in amongst his dreams:

‘Go to London Bridge.’ It said. ‘Go to London Bridge.’

He woke up with a start, sat up, rubbed his eyes, looked about himself... but the room was empty and dark, the only sound was the snoring of his little dog at the foot of the bed.

‘Nothing but a dream.’ he thought to himself, ‘nothing more than a dream.’

And he rolled over and went back to sleep. But the next night the voice was back, clear as moonlight in amongst his dreams. ‘Go to London Bridge. Go to London Bridge.’

He woke up; the room was dark. ‘Nothing but a dream.’ And he fell asleep.

But night after night the voice was back: ‘Go to London Bridge.’

And John Chapman started thinking to himself:

‘Dreams are strange things and sometimes it’s worth listening to them. Maybe I should listen to this one. What would you have done?’

Well, John Chapman thought about it and he thought about it, and in the end he said to himself:

‘Yes! I’ve listened and I’ve heard and I’ll go to London Bridge.’

So he rolled his blanket into a bundle; he packed himself some bread and cheese; he whistled to his dog and he set off.

For two days he tramped and trudged along the highways and the by-ways, the roads, the lanes and the streets until at last he came to London Bridge, stretching over the River Thames.

In those days the bridge was all covered with shops, and there were people walking and people on horseback, there were carriages and carts moving this way and that way over it. He’d never seen such a hustle and bustle in his life. What was he going to do?

What he did was this: he went to the top of the hump of the bridge and he stood and waited... and nothing happened. For a whole day he waited and nothing happened.

He spent a night sleeping on the embankment under the bridge ... and nothing happened.

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The next morning he went back up on to the bridge and sat on a doorstep... and still nothing happened.

He was hungry and he was cold and he started thinking to himself:

‘Dreams are strange things. Sometimes it’s worth listening to them... and sometimes it isn’t.’

And he was just getting up to his feet and thinking he’d start the long trudge home to Swaffham, when one of the shopkeepers opened the door of his shop, stepped down on to the pavement and looked at John Chapman.

‘Now then, stranger,’ he said, ‘what’s the matter with you? All yesterday I saw you standing over there on the hump of the bridge doing nothing, and here you’ve been all morning, sitting on a doorstep, shivering like a lost soul. What’s going on, eh?’

And John Chapman said:

“Well, you see, I had a dream, and in my dream I heard a voice as clear as moonlight, and it said “Go to London Bridge.” And so I came.’

The shopkeeper threw back his head and bellowed with laughter:

‘Dreams! Ha, ha, ha, ha! Stranger, listen to me: you don’t want to take any notice of dream! I’ll tell you something. Last night I dreamed a ridiculous dream. I dreamed I was in a place called – what was it? – Swaffham... and there was a little cottage half open to the weather... and I dreamed I was digging with a spade among the roots of an old russet apple tree ... and there was a pot chock-full of gold... but do you think I’m going to cross half England in search of dream gold? Not me! Now you listen to me and take my advice: if I were you I’d...’

But at that moment the shopkeeper saw that John Chapman was gone!

He was running through the streets of London with his dog at his heels! He didn’t stop running by day or by night until he came home to Swaffham.

And he didn’t waste any time there, either. He fetched a spade and he set to work, digging among the roots of the old russet apple tree. And sure enough, it wasn’t long before the edge of his spade struck a large clay pot, which cracked open, and golden coins trickled down into the soil.

Hundreds of them! Thousands of them!

And from that moment John Chapman’s peddling days were over; his tramping and trudging days were finished.

He had money enough to patch the holes in his roof and mend the glass of his windows.

He had money enough to eat whenever he was hungry.

And all the money that was more than enough (and there was plenty of it) he gave to the poor and the hungry and the homeless.

And so he lived happily to the end of his days.

And when he died, a statue was carved, a beautiful statue of John Chapman and his dog. It was set up in the market-place in Swaffham, and carved into the stone at the foot of it were these words:

‘Even dreams can turn to gold.’

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