

TOBY TICKLER

By Terry Jones

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TOBY had a tickle. It was a really good tickle. He could tickle anybody—even the most unticklish sort of person—and make them laugh.

Now it just so happened that His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm was exactly that sort of person—extremely unticklish. In fact, he hadn't laughed for twenty years.

'Oh, for goodness' sake, Franklin,' the King would say to him. 'It's so gloomy having you around. Why don't you smile sometimes?'

'I smile exactly as often as is necessary,' said His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm, and he demonstrated his smile to the King.

'If that's a smile,' said the King, 'I'm a left-handed corkscrew!'

'I beg your pardon?' said the Royal Treasurer.

'Smiling isn't like gold, you know,' said the King. 'You can't use it up or run out of it!'

I don't care to squander anything unnecessarily, Your Majesty,' replied the Royal Treasurer, and went off to organize the day's business.

Now at the very moment that the Prime Minister was saying this to the King, Toby Tickler's mother was saying something very different to her son.

'Toby, my son,' she said. 'You are as dear to me as any son can be to his mother. If only love could make you fat, you'd be the plumpest boy in the whole kingdom. But look at you? You're just skin and bones, and I haven't enough money to feed us. I can't even pay the rent, and unless I do, we'll be thrown out of our house tomorrow morning.'

'Don't worry, Mother,' said Toby Tickler. 'I'll earn some money?'

‘How are you going to do that?’ replied his mother. ‘You’re too small and puny to work. All you can do is tickle people and make them laugh.’

‘Very well,’ said Toby, ‘I’ll make them laugh and then perhaps they’ll give me a job.’ And with that, he set off into town.

First he went to the Brickmaker and tickled him behind the right ear. Sure enough, the Brickmaker burst out laughing. In fact, he laughed so hard that he dropped his bricks. But when he’d stopped laughing, he turned on Toby Tickler and said: ‘Look what you’ve done? I’ve broken my bricks! Get out of here?’

So then Toby went to the Bootmaker, and he tickled him behind the left ear. Well, the Bootmaker threw down his hammer and nails and started to laugh, and he couldn’t stop laughing for forty minutes. When he did stop, however, he turned on Toby Tickler and shouted: ‘Look what you’ve done? You’ve made me waste forty precious minutes! I don’t want any ticklers around here!’

So then Toby went to the Bellmaker, and tickled him on the back of his neck. The Bellmaker laughed and laughed so much that he cracked the bell he was casting. Whereupon he chased Toby Tickler out of his shop, even though he was still laughing as hard as ever.

Finally, Toby went to the palace kitchen, where he found the Cook cutting up the bacon. Toby thought he’d better not tickle him, so instead he said: ‘Please let me work here. I have to earn some money—otherwise my mother and I will be thrown out of our house.’

But the Cook replied: ‘It’s a hard life, working in the King’s kitchen, and you’re all skin and bones. You’d never last a day!’ And he went on cutting the bacon.

Well, of course, Toby looked at the eggs being boiled for the King’s breakfast, and the bread being buttered, and his mouth began to water, as he began to remember that it was two days since he had last eaten anything.

He tried to leave, but he just couldn’t take his eyes off all that food.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up into the face of one of the pantrymaids.

‘Dearie me?’ she said. ‘You’re as pale as pork and as thin as breadsticks? You’d better come in and have something to eat, before you go anywhere else, young man.’

And she sat him at the pantry table, and brought him plates of porridge and hunks of bread and a little strawberry jam.

Now, it just so happened that the Princess's favourite place in the whole palace was the pantry. She would come down every morning to spend an hour with Polly the Pantrymaid. So, of course, when she came down on this particular morning, who should she find but Toby Tickler, licking his porridge plate clean.

'You've got to earn some money somehow,' agreed the Princess, when she'd heard his story. 'Isn't there anything you're good at?'

Toby shook his head gloomily. 'There's only one thing I'm good at,' he said, 'and that just gets me into trouble.'

'What about sums?' asked the Princess. 'Perhaps my father would give you a job in the counting-house?'

So the Princess took Toby's hand, and led him to the King, who was still eating his breakfast (it used to take him most of the morning). But the King shook his head. 'You don't look serious enough for the counting-house, I'm afraid. His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm would never approve.'

Just at that moment the Royal Treasurer came in, looking very solemn.

'Your Majesty!' he said in his gravest manner.

'Oh dear,' muttered the King. 'Here comes Cheerful Charlie . . .'

'There are three men at the door,' continued the Royal Treasurer, looking more and more solemn, 'who wish you to hear their complaints.'

'Oh dear, do I really have to?' sighed the King.

'It's a most serious matter!' exclaimed the Royal Treasurer.

'I thought it would be,' said the King. 'Very well, show them in.'

So the Royal Treasurer Of The Realm showed in the three men. They were the Brickmaker, the Bootmaker and the Bellmaker. As soon as they saw Toby Tickler, of course, they all three pointed at him and cried:

'That's him?'

'That's who?' asked the King.

‘He made me laugh,’ exclaimed the Brickmaker, ‘so hard that I dropped a whole tray of new-baked bricks and broke them. I demand a good penny for the bricks I broke!’

‘Well, he made me laugh so hard,’ said the Bootmaker, ‘that I wasted forty precious minutes. I demand a silver sixpence for the boots I could have made in that time.’

‘And I demand a golden guinea!’ exclaimed the Bellmaker, ‘for the bell I cracked when he made me laugh.’

‘Is this right?’ demanded His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm. ‘You made all these people laugh?’

‘It’s right enough, and I’m sorry enough,’ said Toby Tickler.

‘Then,’ said the Royal Treasurer, ‘you must pay for every single thing—or I’ll have you thrown into jail by your ears!’

‘I can’t pay anybody for anything!’ cried Toby Tickler. ‘My mother and I haven’t even enough to pay our rent or buy our food.’

‘That’s your lookout!’ shouted the Royal Treasurer. ‘Guards! Seize this boy by the ears, and throw him in jail!’

As the guards came forward to arrest Toby Tickler, the Royal Treasurer put his face right up against Toby’s and said: ‘Perhaps this will teach you that there is a time and a place for everything.’

Well, I don’t really know why it was, but His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm looked so serious and so solemn that Toby Tickler just couldn’t help himself . . . Just as the guards were grabbing him by the ears, he reached out his hand and tickled His Lordship under the chin.

Of course, the Royal Treasurer burst out laughing. In fact, he fell on the floor and rolled around, laughing and laughing and laughing.

‘Amazing!’ exclaimed the King. ‘I haven’t seen him laugh in twenty years! Did you just do that?’

‘I’m afraid it’s the only thing I can do,’ sighed Toby Tickler, as the guards dragged him off by the ears.

‘Then you’re hired!’ shouted the King after him. ‘Bring that boy back here!’ For, by this time, the guards had already dragged Toby out of the breakfast room and halfway

down the steps to the dungeon, so they promptly turned about and dragged him all the way back again—still by his ears. (It was very painful).

Some time later, the King explained Toby's duties to him: 'There certainly is a time and place for everything—especially laughter,' he said. 'You are hereby engaged to make His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm smile at least thirty times every day and laugh out loud at least once!'

Well, that's how Toby Tickler found a job at last, and saved his mother and himself from being thrown out of their house.

As a matter of fact, it turned out that he was good at sums after all, so when His Lordship The Royal Treasurer Of The Realm retired, Toby got his job. Although by that time he didn't really need a job any more, because he'd already married the Princess. You see . . . she sometimes liked Toby to tickle her too!